

**FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS'
EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK
PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE-LEARNING
CENTRE OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
UNIVERSITY**

by

CUZETTE DU PLESSIS

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SUPERVISOR: Prof A.H. ALPASLAN

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DECLARATION

STUDENT NUMBER: 06948502

I, Cuzette du Plessis, declare that **FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE-LEARNING CENTRE OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signed

Cuzette du Plessis

Date

24 June 2011

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ABSTRACT

The University of South Africa (Unisa) as comprehensive open distance learning institution (ODL institution) in South Africa is fulfilling a critical social mandate to serve people who would otherwise not have access to education, either for financial reasons, being employed, living in remote areas, or because they cannot access residential universities owing to disability (Unisa, 2008[a]: 15). In facilitating the entrée of the previously identified groups into tertiary education, Unisa has an open admission policy where students mostly have unlimited access to the system. The policy aims to cross the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between students, academics, courseware, and their peers and to accommodate these prospective students from diverse backgrounds (Unisa, 2008: 2). Unisa's self-evaluation portfolio for the Commonwealth Audit during 2008 mentioned that this policy leads to the revolving door syndrome where students have unlimited access to the system but then often without success (Unisa, 2008[a]: 27). Open access poses a challenge for the training of student social workers within an ODL context. The Department of Social Work at Unisa, currently trains 70% of all social workers in South Africa (Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008: 5). Coupled with the former, is the fact that Unisa is regarded in the tertiary landscape of South Africa as the most affordable university with the result that it attracts large number of students who have come straight from school (Kilfoil cited in Schenck, 2009: 299).

In coping with the large student numbers the Department of Social Work at Unisa is challenged, apart from addressing the theoretical social work programme, to also meet the practical work requirements as set out by the Standard Generating Body of Social Work, in that it needs to provide practical placements for students to conduct their social work practical work training in completion of their Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW) (Lawlor, 2008: 19). The current state of affairs is that the numbers of students requiring practical placements for social work practical work training outnumber the number of practical placements available.

In responding to and addressing these challenges, the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service-learning Centre (hereafter called "Bright Site" or the Bright Site") was established in October 2008 as a strategic project by Unisa's Department of Social Work. The Bright Site was developed in accordance with the service-learning model proposed by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) with the emphasis on service through learning, and learning through service (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2008:6).

The Bright Site was created not as an alternative approach to the traditional placements at Welfare organisations, but rather as an *along-side* social work practical work training *site/context*. A practical work placement is a setting or context where fourth level students are placed for the completion of the practical work component of the BSW degree at Unisa. This

setting is usually a non-profit organisation, an office of the Department of Social Development, or any other setting where professional social services are provided (Lawlor 2008:19).

In observing the challenges posed by the training of student social workers at an open and distance institution and in view of the fact that the Bright Site has been in operation for two years, Unisa's Department of Social Work needed to reflect on the experiences of the students who were doing their social work practical work placement at this Service-learning Centre.

In responding to this need the researcher decided to embark on a research project by engaging the students (who did their social work practical work in this context) with the aim to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences of social work practical work at a Service-learning Centre at an ODL university. A qualitative research approach was utilised with data collected in three phases using three different methods. All the students (the whole population totalling 18 4th level student social workers, for the purposes of this study) enrolled at Bright Site in 2010 who completed their practical training for the period February 2010 to September 2010, were included in phase one (letter writing) and phase two (focus groups discussion) of the data collection process. From this population a sample was purposively selected for conducting phase three of the data collection process (face-to-face semi-structured interviews) to further explore the themes that emerged from the former phases of data collection. Tesch's steps in Creswell (2009:186) were used to structure and manage the qualitative data analysis process. Various data verification strategies were employed in order to enhance the researcher's and readers' ability to assess the accuracy of findings.

This study seeks to amplify the learning and insights obtained whilst the researcher investigated this road by walking *with*, reflecting *with* and learning *with* our students.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- **BSW** Bachelor of Social Work
- **CHE** Council on Higher Education
- **CPD** Continuing Professional Development
- **DSD** Department of Social Development
- **HEQC** Higher Education Quality Committee
- **NASW** National Association of Social Workers
- **NQF** National Qualifications Framework
- **ODL** Open Distance Learning
- **PCA** Person Centred Approach
- **SADC** Southern African Development Community
- **SACSSP** South African Council for Social Service Professions
- **SAQA** South African Qualifications Authority
- **SGB** Standards Generating Body
- **UNICEF** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
- **UNISA** University of South Africa

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

"Nature ever flows, stands never still. Hard blockheads only drive nails all the time; forever...fixing. Heroes do not fix, but flow, bend forward ever and invent a resource for every moment" (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

The University of South Africa (Unisa) dominates distance education in South Africa. The University had 309 434 students enrolled in 2009 (Subotzky, 2010). Unisa as comprehensive open and distance learning institution (ODL institution) in South Africa is fulfilling a critical social mandate by serving people who would otherwise not have access to education - for various reasons such as financial constraints, being employed, living in remote areas, because they cannot access residential universities owing to disability, or due to the strict selection criteria and admission requirements of residential universities (Unisa, 2008[a]:15). Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:7) cite Belawati and Baggaley who describe open and distance learning (ODL learning) as "a system that combines methodology of distance education with the concepts of open learning and flexible learning". Within the context of openness and flexibility, Unisa, as ODL university, is challenged to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between students, academics, courseware, and their peers and to accommodate prospective students from diverse backgrounds (Unisa, 2008:2). ODL thus presents an ideological position of "openness" which affects access and availability to learning, knowledge production and facilitation (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010:7). Coupled with the former, is the fact that Unisa is regarded in the tertiary landscape of South Africa as the most affordable university with the result that it attracts large numbers of students who have recently completed their schooling (Kilfoil cited by Schenck, 2009:299).

In supplying an open and distance environment and facilitating the entrée of the previously identified groups into tertiary education, Unisa is pulling out all the stops in its attempt to be accessible to all students. At present the University is facing the dilemma of having to balance meeting the limitations set with regard to growth in student numbers and the subsidising of students (Van Dyk, 2010). This dilemma is steering Unisa and its Department of Social Work towards a process of critically re-thinking admission requirements since the capping of student numbers is increasingly becoming inevitable (Van Dyk, 2010).

Unisa further strives to create an open and distance learning environment with the expectation that students will succeed. Open and distance learning focuses on: removing

learning barriers, being student centred, supporting students, and the facilitation and development of flexible learning programmes (Unisa, 2008:2). Although there is a strong expectation that students will succeed, Unisa has also been criticised for its open policy which allows students into the system without the required skills (Unisa, 2008[a]:27). The University's self-evaluation portfolio for the Commonwealth Audit during 2008 mentioned that this policy leads to the revolving door syndrome where students have unlimited access to the system but then often without success (Unisa, 2008[a]:27).

One can argue that within the bigger African and South African landscape there is a sense of urgency for the successful throughput of students who not only master an academic thought process but who could actually contribute to a better world, responding to real life issues. This sense of urgency and need for success become vital in view of the facts below. Mbeki (2009:153) cites a study by Rice, Stewart and Patrick who found that 23 of the 28 "critically weak" states are Sub-Saharan African countries. These "weak states" are defined and characterised by a lack of: essential capacity and/or will to fulfil their government responsibilities; to foster and enable economic growth, to maintain and establish legitimate and accountable political institutions, to control their territory, and protect it and their people from violence and conflict, as well as lacking the ability to meet the basic human needs of their populations. This exposure to poverty, illness and vulnerability is echoed in many writings. Stiglitz (2002:5) confirms this grave picture and argues that "...the divide between the haves and have-nots has left increasing numbers in the third world in dire poverty, living on less than a dollar a day...[in] the last decade of the twentieth century the actual number of people living in poverty has actually increased by almost 100 million". Patel (2007:52) cites the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) statistics estimating that at least 40% percent of people in Southern African countries or 76 million are living in extreme poverty. Crowe (2007), a correspondent of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), reports on the UNICEF website on the increase in child mortality in South Africa. In KwaZulu Natal there has been a trebling of infant mortality in the past 15 years. She quotes Sister Langhans at St. Mary's hospital in Marian Hill, KwaZulu Natal: *"...Babies are just dying everyday. You just have to walk through the paediatric unit and every... second baby is infected... Something has to be done, and done very soon"*.

It is therefore comprehensible that the South African Ministry of Education has highlighted that South Africa's new democracy depends upon the production of professionals who not only have globally competitive knowledge and skills, but who are also "socially responsible and conscious of their role in contributing to the national development effort and social transformation" (Department of Education South Africa, 2001:5). In response to the former and with reference to social work, Earle (2008:1) observes that these national ideals for all professionals correspond closely to the internationally stated ideals of the social work profession. The critical importance of social work professionals to the successful

implementation of social developmental welfare policies has been acknowledged by the South African National Government (Department of Social Development South Africa, 2005). However, these expectations and demands on the social work services in South Africa exceed the capacity of social service professionals.

In 2006, South Africa had approximately 11 111 registered social workers of whom 5 076 (or 45.7%) were working in the direct formal welfare sector (Earle, 2007:2). Statistics were verified with the South African Council for Social Service Professions in 2011 with the actual statistics as 11 416 Social workers registered in 2006. Yet to implement the *priority* services and activities as prescribed by the comprehensive Children's Bill, Barberton (2006:3) estimates that in 2005/6 a total of 8 683 social workers were required to engage in direct welfare focusing exclusively on the needs of children, a figure which is to escalate to 16 844 by 2010/11. In order to undertake *all* services and activities at 'best practice' levels, the requirement for social workers focusing only on children would be substantially higher, rising from 48 364 in 2005/6 to approximately 67 507 in 2010/11 (Earle, 2007:2). Within this context social work in South Africa was declared a "scarce and critical skill" in 2003 (Department of Social Development South Africa, 2006:13).

In response to the shortage of social workers the Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers in South Africa (Department of Social Development South Africa, 2006:13) highlighted the importance of increasing the numbers of social work graduates from the national higher education system as one way of addressing current shortages. Yet it notes with concern the "discrepancy in the number of learners who enter the universities to study social work and the number ... who complete their studies in this field" (Department of Social Development South Africa, 2006:14). The document also highlighted the importance of developing a "new cadre" of social workers, who are able to "effectively and efficiently adhere to the demands of a changing society and ensure alignment with the government's transformation agenda in terms of service delivery" (Department of Social Development South Africa, 2006:16). Acknowledging the inevitable gap in service delivery, Mr E.J van Vuuren (the then Deputy Director General: Integrated Development) briefed the Portfolio Committee on Social Development in October 2006, on the scarcity of social workers and social auxiliary workers in South Africa. Payment of study debts and bursary schemes are seen as some of the ways to recruit and retain social workers (Van Vuuren, 2006). Relating this to higher education it appears that these recruitment and retention strategies would be an added factor contributing to the increase in student numbers at Unisa.

As a result of the latter and Unisa's social mandate, as well as its corresponding lenient admission requirements and affordability, the university is attracting large numbers of students. The Department of Social Work at Unisa currently trains 70% of all social workers in South Africa (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2008:5). For the year 2010 Unisa's

Department of Social Work had a total of 27 924 student registrations in the 24 modules that are offered. The fourth-year student numbers increased by 35% during 2010 to a total of 389 students (Unisa, 2010[a]). The substantial influx of social work students could be appreciated and contextualised against the discussed broader African, South African and Social Work landscape.

Coupled with the influx of students who specifically want to study towards becoming social workers, the open access policy of Unisa poses various challenges for the training of student social workers within an ODL context. The prescribed curriculum needs to enable students to master the exit level outcomes set for the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree in South Africa, as stipulated by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (SAQA, 2006). An exit level outcome refers to the outcomes a qualifying learner needs to achieve by the time of leaving the learning programme for the successful achievement of a specific qualification (SAQA, 2006[a]). SAQA again is the body responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework which was established by the SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995 (SAQA, 2006[a] and SAQA, 2006[b]). These exit level outcomes for the BSW degree apply to theoretical as well as practical training and were primarily developed for residential contexts. Various exit levels have practical components, where students need to demonstrate and apply professional skills, intervention strategies, and values (SAQA, 2006). These outcomes are based on the “social development paradigm of welfare” adopted by South Africa “thus supporting a people-centred approach to social and economic development (SAQA, 2006). In short, quoting Patel (2007:204), the goals of this paradigm are to “promote social and economic development, participation of socially excluded in development efforts, achieve tangible improvements in the quality of life of the people, promote human development and social well-being”.

Thus, apart from the theoretical social work programme, training at the Department of Social Work at Unisa also needs to meet the professional standards and practical work implied within the BSW as formulated by the Standard Generating Body (SGB) for Social Work as registered on the SAQA data base with ID number 23994 (SAQA, 2006). Due to the BSW being within the outcomes based education and training paradigm, which can be summed up as “results orientated thinking” focussing on what the student is able to do at the end of a course linked to specific learning outcomes, practical placements or field placements are required for students to conduct their social work practical work training (Davis, Amin, Grande, O Neill, Pawlina, Viggiano & Zuber, 2007: 717). The SGB again was a registered body in terms of the SAQA Act No. 58 of 1995 responsible for establishing training and education standards (SAQA, 2006[a] and SAQA, 2006[b]). Although this Act was replaced by the NQF Act, (Act No. 67 of 2008) the actual outcomes of the BSW remained unchanged (SAQA, 2006[c] & SAQA, 2006[d]).

The “field placement” referred to above is a setting or context where fourth level students are placed to do their practical work as required for the BSW degree. This setting is usually a non-profit organisation, an office of the Department of Social Development or any other setting where professional social services are provided (Lawlor, 2008:19). However, the demand for placement opportunities is under threat due to the limited capacity of welfare organisations. Despite their dependency on government subsidies for survival, funding received by welfare service agencies from the Department of Social Development has always been inadequate. The lack of infrastructure, scarce resources, and general ability of agencies to effectively accommodate students is further affected by the number of social workers who leave the country due to poor salaries and working conditions (cf. Hölscher, 2008:3).

Van Dyk (2010) concurs with the aforementioned train of thought when noting that the increase in student numbers adds pressure to the already stretched-out and limited resources of welfare organisations. This complicates the process of locating and accessing field work placements as well as the ability to coordinate, monitor and evaluate students’ practical training at the placements mentioned. The Department of Social Work at Unisa also competes with other universities demanding the same practical work placements for their student social workers. The demands for practical placements, as well as student numbers in the Department exceed the available supply and have compelled the Department of Social Work at Unisa to think differently, and to investigate service-learning as an option, alternative to the custom of letting students do their social work practical work training at welfare organisations. The following questions were critically addressed by the Department of Social Work at Unisa:

- How do we create training opportunities and contexts for social work students that are not dependant on traditional placements at social welfare agencies?
- How will students experience social work practical training in contexts other than welfare agencies?
- Could alternative contexts for training of social work students, provide students with the same experience and opportunities for professional development? (Van Dyk, 2010)

In responding to these questions and addressing challenges faced in an open and distance learning environment, The Bright Site of Sunnyside Service-learning Centre¹ was initiated (to amongst others provide service learning) not as an alternative placement setting, but rather an along-side social work practical training centre (next to the traditional and existing welfare organisations making themselves available as social work practical work placement settings). Service-learning can be described as a pedagogical approach which dovetails community

¹ Hereafter “The Bright Site of Sunnyside Service Learning Centre” will be referred to as “The Bright Site” or “Bright Site”

service with the academic programme of the students (Lemieux & Allen, 2007:309). Harkavy is cited by Lemieux and Allen (2007:309) in identifying the outcomes for service-learning as: student learning, service to the community and the development of collaborative and mutually respectful relationships between students and the communities they are involved with as a result of their studies. Within this context service-learning could thus provide practical work training opportunities as required for the BSW degree.

The Bright Site was established as a strategic project by the Department of Social Work in October 2008. The envisaged centre was funded and sanctioned by the University's executive management and developed in collaborative consultation with the stakeholders and the community of Sunnyside. The founding of the centre was partially in response to high student numbers, the standards as stipulated with regard to social work practical work, and the challenge of attaining practical placements for the large numbers of students enrolling for social work studies at Unisa (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2008:11).

The rationale for establishing the Bright Site was to create a service-learning context for student social workers, and to benefit communities through social services rendered by students (Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008:11). The centre's vision is formulated as: *"Unisa and communities engaged in mutual service"* with its accompanied mission statement as *"Integrating and capacitating the worlds of Unisa and communities by engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship through service-learning opportunities, shared resources, and research"* (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2010:6). The Bright Site of Sunnyside has three major functions, namely:

- In-service-learning or, to put it differently, to learn whilst rendering a service,
- Community engagement and support, and
- Research and the development of capacities (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2010:3-4).

In aligning the vision, mission and objectives of the Bright Site to the institutional objectives of Unisa, a new context within the open and distance learning landscape was initiated for the professional development of student social workers.

The following objectives were embraced by the Service-learning Centre:

- The promotion of participation in corporate social responsibility and community engagement
- Enhance student 'graduateness'
- Establish a culture of scholarship and enhance research activities
- Offer student services to enhance the total student experience
- Facilitate processes and practices that promote student wellbeing, enhance sound academic management, quality assurance and throughput (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2010:2).

The Bright Site was also developed in accordance with the service-learning model proposed by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2008:6). The CHE is an independent statutory body in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 199) responsible for advising the Minister of Higher Education and Training on all policy issues related to higher education, quality assurance in higher education and training, monitoring the state of higher education and contributing to the development of higher education (CHE, 2008-2009:7). In June 2006 the CHE produced a document related to service-learning as part of the curriculum in higher education institutions (Bender, Daniels, Lazarus, Naude & Sattar, 2006). In this document service-learning is regarded as an integral part of higher education in South Africa, with the emphasis on service-learning as “applied learning directed at the needs of the community and integrated into an academic programme and curriculum” (Bender et al., 2006:24). Service-learning further needs to be understood within the context of the core functions of higher education. The CHE highlights the core functions of higher education institutions (HEIs) as teaching, research and community engagement. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) included community engagement as one of the core functions of higher education because of its potential to advance social development and social transformation agendas in higher education. The HEQC is a permanent committee of the CHE and is mandated by the Higher Education Act (Act No. 101 of 1997) to conduct quality assurance systems focusing on the accreditation of higher education programmes and on the audit of the quality management systems of all higher education institutions (Singh, 2006: ix). Coming back to community engagement as one of the three core functions in the context of higher education, such engagement can materialise in various ways, one of which is service-learning (Bender et al., 2006:11).

The following national policies (referred to in Bender et al., 2006:4) inform and mandate community engagement/service-learning in higher education programmes:

- The green paper on higher education transformation of 1996 identified the need for co-operation and partnerships between the HEIs and sectors of the larger society. It asks for higher education programmes to be responsive “to the social, political, economic and cultural needs of the country and all its people”.
- The Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation of 1997 informed the development of the National Plan for Higher Education and asserts that community service through service-learning should be entrenched in the culture and values of the HEIs making sure that students, HEIs as well as communities benefit from the initiatives.
- The Higher Education Act of 1997 makes provision for the HEQC as a permanent subcommittee of the CHE and gives effect to the goals of the White Paper. One of the founding documents of the HEQC identified academically based community service

as one of the three areas (along with teaching and research) for quality assurance in higher education (Bender et al., 2006:4).

The ensuing problem statement can thus be seen within the context of this study situated at the Bright Site as an alongside but required social work practical work placement setting for fourth-year student social workers at Unisa as an open and distance learning university.

1.1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

With the above context as background to the study, a problem statement needs to be formulated. For Monette, Sullivan and De Jong (2008:77) the research problem is the initial step in the research process and provides the basis for the study.

The problem statement can thus be given as follows: Unisa's Department of Social Work attracts large numbers of students resulting from Unisa's ODL policy, lenient admission requirements, and its affordability as a tertiary institution.

Coupled with this is the fact that social work has been declared a "scarce skill", and that large numbers of students are drawn to the profession by scholarships provided by Government Departments.

The student demand for practical training, as implied by the BSW registered on the SAQA data base, exceeds the available placement opportunities at welfare organisations that are under threat due to limited financial and human resources, high workloads, and poor working conditions.

The Department of Social Work at Unisa responded to this challenge by initiating the Bright Site, not as an alternative Centre, but rather an along-side social work practical work training Centre.

In view of the fact that the Bright Site has been in operation for two years, Unisa's Department of Social Work needed to reflect on the experiences of the students who were doing their social work practical work placement at this Centre.

1.1.2 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

The Bright Site has been in operation for two years (with a similar Centre started in Durban in January 2011) and the researcher was involved from its inception with supervising students at the Bright Site Centre and subsequently also became involved in managing the Centre. In observing the challenges posed by the training of student social workers at an open and

distance institution and the development of training programmes, and in observing and facilitating the professional development of students at the Centre, the researcher and the Department of Social Work at Unisa as initiator of the Bright Site increasingly became aware of the need to critically assess the learning experiences of the students at this Centre. An informal research project was initially undertaken by the researcher for the purposes of presenting a paper at a National Social Work Conference. Following the outcome of this paper and in consultation with the Chair of the Department of Social Work as well as the Research Coordinator in the department, it was decided to expand this preliminary research project and convert it into a fully-fledged research project with a view to furthering the researcher's career goals and making information available as needed by the Department and resulting from this research endeavour.

The researcher therefore embarked on this study in order to reflect on the experiences of students who did their social work practical work training at the Service-learning Centre. The rationale for the research was to assess how the students had experienced the service-learning context in which they were placed. The envisaged outcome was to develop an in-depth understanding of students' experiences and learning, whilst studying at an open and distance university and also being in service to the community.

This study hoped to amplify and critically reflect on the learning experiences of the fourth-year 2010 student social workers placed at the Bright Site of Sunnyside. The aim of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre, while enrolled at an ODL university.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION, PRIMARY GOAL AND OBJECTIVE(S) OF THE RESEARCH

Qualitative studies ask research questions and steer away from making predictions or hypotheses (Creswell, 2009:129). Concurring with this idea, Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002:723) argue that a qualitative research question will not be hypothetical, proving or disproving of a certain truth, but would rather explore a "depth of understanding" of a phenomenon. To this effect, the study did not set out to search for any objective truth. The study rather tried to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre at an ODL university.

The study was guided by a research question. This question determined the focus as well as the purpose of the study (Soy, 1996). For Jansen (2007:3) a research question is needed for

two reasons, namely it will direct the researcher to the relevant and appropriate literary resources, and secondly it will provide a focus for the data collection.

The research question formulated at the outset to focus this study was the following:

What are the experiences of fourth level student social workers, at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre?

Informed by the research question are the aim or the goal and the objectives of the study. The research question is thus a reflection of the aim of the study which in qualitative research is to achieve a “depth of understanding” (Fossey et al., 2002:723). For Key (1997) the goal of a qualitative investigation is to obtain an in-depth understanding of and to describe and to discover the area of study.

Creswell (2009:111) emphasises that we need to clearly distinguish between the “purpose statement (aim)”, “the research problem”, and “research question”. He argues that “the purpose statement sets forth the intent of the study, not the problem or issue leading to the need of the study”. From the aforementioned overarching research question the **aim or the purpose of this study** was formulated as follows: *to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth year student social workers’ experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre, while enrolled at an ODL university.*

The objectives of the study can also be seen as the steps taken to operationalise the goal/aim of the study. The objectives are the measurable, attainable steps linked to a time frame that will be taken to achieve the goal (Fouché and de Vos, 2005:104). **The research objectives of this study were thus formulated as follows:**

- To explore the experiences of fourth-year student social workers, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context.
- To describe the experiences of fourth-year student social workers relating to their social work practical work training in an ODL context at a Service-learning Centre.
- Based on the above findings, to report the experiences of fourth-year student social workers relating to their social work practical work training in an ODL context at a Service-learning Centre, and to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

In order to realise these research objectives the following **task objectives** were formulated:

- To collect the data in three phases by means of: letter writing (phase one of the data collection), a focus group discussion (phase two of data collection)

and face-to-face semi-structured interviews (phase three of the data collection).

- To include the whole population of fourth-level student social workers (totalling a number of 18 students), who enrolled for social work practical work (for the duration of February 2010 to September 2010), at a Service-learning Centre, in writing letters to loved ones (phase one of the data collection). In these letters they reflected on their experiences about their social work practical work training at this Service-learning Centre.
- To thematically analyse the information collected during the letter writing phase of data collection.
- To develop a semi-structured interview guide based on the themes that were derived from analysis of the contents of the letters for the purposes of a focus group interview (for phase two of the data collection) in order to explore these themes in more depth.
- To include the whole population of fourth level student social workers (totalling a number of 18 students), who enrolled for social work practical work (for the duration of February 2010 to September 2010), at a Service-learning Centre, in a focus group discussion (phase two of the data collection). The focus group discussion is aimed to further reflect and elaborate upon the participants' experiences related to their social work practical work training at this Service-learning Centre.
- To thematically analyse the information collected during the focus group discussion.
- To develop a semi-structured interview guide based on the themes derived from analysis of the contents of the letters as well as the focus group discussion for the purposes of face-to-face semi-structured interviews (phase three of the data collection). These interviews are a means to triangulation of data sources and to explore the identified themes in the previous two phases in more depth.
- To purposively draw a sample from the population and to engage them in face-to-face interviews.
- To sift, sort and analyse the data according to the steps of qualitative data analysis proposed by Tesch (in Creswell, 2009:186) in order to interpret the data.
- To do literature control as well as member checking in order to verify the study.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the aim of this study, namely to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-Learning Centre at an ODL university, the reader now needs to understand how this goal will be accomplished. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007:34) state that it is essential that the researcher should give account of methods, strategies and tactics deployed to execute a study. This section will therefore clarify the qualitative approach followed in this research, the research design and the method (i.e. the methods of data collection, analysis and verification), as well as the ethical considerations in this study. The discussion on the methodology as set out above will be introduced by a discussion on the philosophical underpinnings of the chosen qualitative research approach.

1.3.1 THE RESEARCH APPROACH AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE RESEARCH APPROACH

In this research project a qualitative research approach was followed but before this approach is illuminated by defining the concept "qualitative research", its characteristics and its fittingness for investigating the research topic, the philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative approach will be provided.

The qualitative research approach relates to the postmodern or post-positivist, social construction paradigm within which this study will be done. This paradigm can further be translated into the Person Centred Approach (PCA) which underpins the curriculum for training student social workers at Unisa.

John Wheeler (quoted by Zukav, 1979:54), a well-known physicist at Princeton wrote: "May, the universe in some, strange sense be brought into being by the participation of those who participate? ...The vital act is the act of participation. Participation is the incontrovertible new concept given by quantum mechanics. It strikes down the term observer of classical theory, the man who stands safely behind the thick glass wall and watches what goes on without taking part. It can't be done quantum mechanics says."

Zukav's above quotation by Wheeler partially allows for a postmodern and social construction paradigm that will guide this research. How and what researchers and scientists based their descriptions of this *how* to describe human patterns and behaviour have changed through the centuries. Streubert (2003:2-3) elaborates and makes mention of the fact that Descartes' positivistic reasoning was based on the idea that description and measurement of an outside *objective reality* are possible. Reality was explainable by cause and effect. Kant questioned

the observable as *real* or *only reality*. For him *nature* or *reality* was dependent on the individual's thought and reasoning. Later the post-positivist thinkers argued that there is a *reality* but that it could only be known "partially" or "imperfectly" (Streubert, 2003:2-3). This was followed by a postmodern, social construction discourse, where *reality*, as we know it, is regarded as constructed through our interaction with others. Reality therefore cannot be seen as "unified" or "absolute", but rather as people's interpretation of their own world experiences (Freedman and Combs, 1996:33). The medium through which we co-construct these realities is language. Language is considered to be metaphoric in nature and does not represent or reflect the world around us. Through our language we construct or constitute the world as we perceive it to be. Speaking can thus never be neutral, because we create as we perceive (Freedman and Combs, 1996:1, 28-29).

A qualitative approach is thus based on the "belief" or epistemology that there are "multiple realities", that these realities are "socially constructed and context dependent" and that the "discovery of meaning is the basis for knowledge" (Barroso, 2010:88). It therefore invites and enables the researcher and participants to co-construct an in-depth understanding of the researched topic.

The postmodern, social construction epistemology ties in well with the Person Centred Approach which in essence is also a way of being and a way of recognising a world of multiple realities (cf. Grobler, Schenck and du Toit, 2003:44). This theory, developed by Carl Rodgers in his work with individuals and groups, puts people and their frame of reference at the centre of the world (Grobler and Schenck, 2009:164). It further dovetails with the national approach to social development which as principle amongst other encourages collective action (Patel, 2007:204). Such research would thus be a study *with* and not for or on behalf of those involved or affected by it. A qualitative research approach enables the researcher to step into the shoes of the participants whose frame of reference will steer the meaning making process. This approach facilitated processes of understanding of the fourth-year student social workers' practical work experiences at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context.

As stated in the introductory part of this section, a qualitative approach was chosen to conduct the research because it allows for description and exploration from the frame of reference by the participants. Rennie as cited in Grobler and Schenck (2009:165) regards the most remarkable ability of humans as being able to reflect on themselves, their actions and thought processes and to understand what is happening in their world. Qualitative research seeks to answer just that, namely the "what", "how" and/or "why" questions of a phenomenon (Green and Thorogood, 2009:5). Qualitative research concerns itself with studies about "peoples' life stories, behaviour, but also about organisational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships" (Whittaker, 2002:251). Qualitative research provides a fitting vehicle for such reflection and in-depth meaning making *with* participants. It aims to provide

an understanding of how and why people perceive and experience things the way they do, based on a discussion between the researcher and participants which is largely determined by the participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences (Cacioppo, n.d.).

The researcher's rationale for using a qualitative approach was based on the characteristics of the approach which created the context for a descriptive and explorative study.

Fitting with the philosophical underpinning of a qualitative approach, a distinctive characteristic of qualitative research is its **inductive nature**. Qualitative studies do not set out to test a hypothesis or theory. Rather theory development is based on the researchers first "immersing themselves in the social situation or culture under study" (Mark, 1996:212). This is done by the researcher's close interaction with participants. On this basis the researcher will organise categories or concepts to explain and describe what they are observing or studying. This is not a fixed process but can be rather described as a cycle of observing, gathering data, co-constructing new theory, observing etc. (Mark, 1996:212). Creswell (2009:175) explains this process of **inductive data analysis** as working from the "bottom up" referring to a process where the researcher works back and forth between data gathering and the themes until a comprehensive set of themes has been established. Relevant to this study the concepts of "service-learning", "social work training" and "ODL" are well known, but the experiences of the students, related to these concepts, stay unique and need to be explored and described in order for new conceptualisations to develop.

In order to develop a new understanding with emerging new themes, categories or concepts, the study must focus on the complete or **whole picture**. This is another characteristic inherent in qualitative research (Key, 1997). This compels the researcher to engage intensely with the participants, for the purposes of discovering, identifying and reporting on as many issues related to the study as possible (Creswell, 2009:176). Each participant's experience of practical work at the Service-learning Centre was unique and the reporting of their multiple world realities granted just such a holistic focal point.

A 'blueprint-plan' research approach would not facilitate an environment conducive to studying the multiple realities of these student social workers. A qualitative approach was therefore chosen because of its **emerging design**, where methodology is not prescribed but is dove-tailed with the ever-changing world of participants and emerging data. Barroso (2010:117) therefore also suggests that this necessitates ongoing negotiations with the participants, amongst others, regarding consent, participation, type of data emerging, and ways of data collection.

A natural setting provides the best context for a "bottom up" approach. Dale (2006) talks about the naturalistic characteristic of qualitative research where studies are conducted in a

real-world situation. The researcher thus goes to the participant's natural setting (Kielborn, 2001). This study was carried out at the Bright Site where the participants (fourth-year student social workers) were placed to do their social work practical work training.

Qualitative research encourages a **richer understanding of people's subjective** experiences, behaviour and knowledge (Monette et al., 2008:224). Oka and Shaw (2000) talk about seeing people from the inside where the researcher attempts to understand the meanings people themselves attach to, amongst others, their experiences, deeds and thoughts. The researcher's focus was thus on learning from the participants, how they described and/or explained their own meanings of experiences and not those interpreted by the researcher (Creswell, 2009:175). By letter writing, a focus group discussion, and in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews the researcher aimed to gain an in-depth understanding from the participants' frame of reference about their social work practical work training experiences at a Service-learning Centre.

Although the researcher in qualitative research strives for this richer understanding of the subjective world of participants from the participants' frame of reference, the researcher remains the **key instrument** in the facilitation of the research process. *The researcher* enters into a close relationship with the participants and *the researcher* carries out the methodology. Patton (2002) postulates that any understanding of a phenomenon in qualitative research needs to consider the researcher's personal experience and engagement in the process. Codey as cited in Sears (1992:65) argues that "any study of society that is not supported by a firm grasp of personal ideas is empty and dead, mere doctrine not real knowledge at all". The researcher thus needs to be explicit about her/his own position in relation to the research and possible biases brought into the research process.

In this study the researcher's relationship and engagement with the participants was not only defined as that of researcher. The researcher was also engaged as the Service-learning Centre manager, overseeing the practical placement of the students. As such the researcher as Service-learning Centre manager had to provide opportunities for students to learn whilst serving a community, ensuring students had direct access to lectures and supervisors and tailoring the practical placement with the students' fourth-year social work practical work learning outcomes. In addition to these two roles (that of researcher and of Service-learning Centre manager), the researcher further acted as the module leader for the students' fourth-year community work modules. This role implied that the researcher had the added responsibility to facilitate learning but also acted as the final examiner. Patton (2002) talks about the empathic stance of the researcher in qualitative research, where the researcher listens to and understands with sensitivity, respect and awareness and without judgement. Being cognisant of the aforementioned, the researcher was very mindful of the impact these

roles had on the relationship with the participants as well as the study itself. Whether seen as strengths or barriers these roles and their effects had to be unpacked with the participants.

Reflexivity as characteristic of qualitative research will allow the researcher to address but as Burck (2005:242) suggests “not dissolve, the tensions, and complexities of the research relationship”. Reflexivity in research implies that the researcher critically reflects on the research itself as well as the role of the researcher in the generation of the findings (Green and Thorogood, 2009:24). Chapters Two and Three of this report will amongst other actions critically reflect on the researcher’s application of, and findings regarding, the qualitative research process.

Although the researcher’s rationale for using a qualitative approach was to acquire a deeper understanding of the fourth-year student social workers’ experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL university, there is a danger that research might become an end in itself. The question of “*so what?*” could be raised. Barroso (2010:89) alerts the reader to this and criticises motivations where a qualitative approach is employed merely because little is known about a subject, or where an “it does not matter” attitude is adopted. She argues if we as researchers want people to open themselves and their lives up to us, researchers have the responsibility to explore those things that will make a difference in people’s lives. In adopting the qualitative approach for this research endeavour Barroso’s advice was taken to heart in that the researcher discovered *with* and co-constructed *with* the participants the outcomes of this study and how they would be applied in future.

In conclusion the researcher’s rationale for using the qualitative research approach was based on the approach’s philosophical underpinnings of meaning making *with* rather than for or on behalf of those involved in the study. The qualitative approach facilitated the most suitable means of expression for an in-depth understanding of the fourth-year student social workers’ social work practical work training experiences at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context.

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design can be described as the map the researcher will use in order to answer the research question. Green and Thorogood (2009:42) refer to the design as the “logic of the study: the what, how and why of data production”. Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:89) talk about the research design as the plan of how the research will be conducted. The research design will consider things like the methods of data collection, how the participants will be chosen, when and where the research will be done, data analyses, and how data will be disseminated.

However, Janesick (1994:215) warns that one can become so involved in method “and in so doing separate experience from knowing”. Qualitative research should focus on the “substance of the findings [and] ... depends on the presentation of solid descriptive data, so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study” (Janesick, 1994:215).

For the purposes of this study the aim was to develop just such an understanding of the meanings of the experiences of being a fourth-year student social worker doing social work practical work training in the context of a Service-learning Centre of an ODL-university

In the context of this study the researcher employed the most suitable research design fitting with the aim of the study, namely ***an explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry.***

For Neuman (2006:33-34), explorative and descriptive research “blur in practice” and have many similarities. With an explorative design the researcher wants to learn about a fairly unknown topic. It addresses “what” questions and tends not to lead to definite answers. Descriptive designs will be used when the researcher wants to describe a phenomenon and focuses on “who” and “why” questions relating to the topic.

For Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:92-93), explorative research will begin a process of creating or building knowledge, based on the assumption that little is known about the subject. Explorative research lays the groundwork for further research on a given phenomenon. Although much is known about social work training, training in distance education, and the use of technology in training social workers, the context of student social workers doing their practical work at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context is less known. This study therefore asked the “what” question relating to an explorative design in understanding the participants’ social work practical work training experiences at such a Service-learning Centre in an ODL university.

A descriptive design builds on and complements an explorative design and seeks to get a better understanding of “what is” (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996:93). After exploring the experiences of student social workers surrounding their social work practical training at a Service-learning Centre the study further asked questions relating to why the experience was as described or what influenced these experiences. (Refer to the interview-guide for the semi-structured face-to-face interviews in Chapter 2: paragraph 2.4.2.)

Contextual studies seek to gain an understanding of a topic within the relevant participant context in their real world (Schurink, 1998:281). The context in this study was very specific to the learning environment of the participants, namely a Service-learning Centre at an ODL

university. Complementary to the contextual design this study also used a phenomenological design.

A phenomenological design concerns itself with the unique and particular world-view of participants and acknowledges it as unique for each person (Nicholls, 2009:586). If one “seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and their intentions” within their real life world (cf. Crabtree & Miller, 1999:25), one can include phenomenology as a strategy of inquiry. Phenomenology is the search for essences and answers the questions, “What is it like to experience ... Tell me about your experience of ...”etc. (Crabtree & Miller, 1999:25). This study aimed to gain such an in-depth understanding of the unique world and real life practical work experiences of student social workers doing their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre.

This explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry provided the framework for the specific research method employed and this will become the focus of discussion in the next section of this chapter.

1.5 THE RESEARCH METHOD

The research method addresses issues of population and how participants were selected, how the data were collected, how participants were prepared for this collection, and how the data were analysed and verified. In the ensuing discussion the aspects of population and how participants were selected will be presented.

1.5.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

In deliberating on the population and sampling of this study the researcher provided answers for the following questions: who are the participants in the study? Where do they come from? Population is an abstract concept that can be described as a larger pool from which the sample or unit of study will be chosen (Neuman, 2006:224). In the human sciences the term “population” usually refers to all possible cases one is interested in studying and people with specific characteristics in common relevant to the study (Monette et al., 2008:136). In this study the population can be described as all fourth-year student social workers who enrolled for and completed their social work practical work training (for the duration of February 2010 to September 2010) at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL University. The population totalled a number of eighteen participants. For the first two phases of data collection (i.e. writing letters and the focus group discussion) the whole population was included. For the third phase of data collection (the face-to-face semi-structured interviews), a sample was drawn.

A sample is normally drawn from the identified population of the study. It can be defined as “a subset of individuals selected for study from among people...within a defined population”. The researcher could also use subsamples which refer to “two or more groupings of cases within a sample” (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996:115).

Qualitative sampling concerns itself with “information richness”. The effectiveness of information richness is dependent on the appropriateness and adequacy of the sample. Appropriateness would refer to those people who can best inform the study. Adequacy asks how completely the research question could be answered or will the information gathered enhance an in-depth understanding of the topic (Fossey et al., 2002:726).

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative studies because the researcher searches for those people who will best help to inform the study and/or provide an in-depth understanding of the topic being researched (Creswell, 2003:185). In this study a purposive sample was drawn for the *third phase* of data collection. As indicated above, for the first two phases of data collection the whole population was included in writing letters based on a guideline as well as a focus group discussion. For the third phase of data collection, and based on the data analysis of the above mentioned letters and focus group discussion, a sample was then purposively selected for follow-up in-depth face-to-face interviews.

Although purposive sampling actively sets out to identify people that will best shed light on the specific study, the researcher needs to be clear whether these people fit the criteria for such an in-depth understanding of the proposed study. This necessitated the stipulation of clear inclusion criteria (Barroso, 2010:90-91).

The population and subsequent sample for this study had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Students had to be enrolled for their fourth year of social work studies at Unisa in 2010 in order to be included in the study.
- Only fourth-year students who had completed their social work practical work training at the Bright Site for the period February 2010 – October 2010, were considered for inclusion.

In order to be considered for the third phase of data collection, students from the population had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Students had to complete the letter writing based on a guideline in order to be included in the sub-sample.
- Students had to engage in the focus group discussion as criterion for inclusion.

No sample size was initially determined but the principle of data saturation was followed. Barroso (2010:91) argues that qualitative research has no set sample size but data are

collected to the point of data saturation, which means the information shared by participants becomes repetitive.

Having established clarity on the population as well as sample relevant to this study, the researcher will now explain how the data for this study were collected.

1.5.2 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

In the discussion below specific attention will be given to the methods used for data collection, preparations for the data collection including preparation of participants, the role of the researcher, and the interviewing skills that were used.

1.5.2.1 Preparation for Data Collection

Building a relationship with the participants paves the way for data collection. In this study the researcher and participants were well known to one another. As explained before, the researcher's relationship and engagement with the participants was not just defined as that of researcher only but also as that of Service-learning Centre manager and lecturer. These multiple relationships could have posed a dilemma for building trustful relationships as context for data collection. Unisa's Tuition Policy (Unisa, 2005[a]:2, 5) emphasises constant critical reflection which encourages students "to be active, engaged and involved participants in their own learning process, reflecting on what and how they learn, and making connections to the workplace and to their broader communities". As ideal this could not exist without active pursuance. Continuous action, reflection and planning were therefore part of the day-to-day practices at the Bright Site where students actively took part in decision-making regarding various aspects of their social work practical work training. Learning was always interactive with participants constantly evaluating the impact and effectiveness of their social work practical work training. (Refer also to Chapter Three, par 3.3.1.6, where a sub-theme regarding the participants' experience of the person centredness of the Bright Site emerged.) The above relationships were thus defined within a culture, and day-to-day practices of critical discourse, participation and student centredness which did not undermine the researcher's sensitivity for the possible impact of the dual relationships with the participants.

The prospective participants were further prepared by means of a group meeting where the researcher obtained their voluntary and informed consent and prepared them for the process of data collection. The researcher adopted the following guidelines of Rogers and Bouey (1996:65-66) regarding important actions to be taken into account when preparing participants for taking part in a research project:

- The purpose of the study was explained.
- The researcher clarified the possible value of the study.

- The researcher also explained to the potential participants why they in particular were chosen to participate in the study.
- The potential participants were provided in advance with some of the questions that were explored with them in the study. The researcher further contracted with the participants that the other questions which would guide the follow-up interviews would be co-constructed in participation with them.
- Where the interviews took place was clarified and negotiated.
- How long the interviews would take was negotiated.
- Potential participants were informed that the researcher would tape-record the interviews so that the researcher could focus on them, with undivided attention, in order not to lose important information shared by them.
- Participants were informed that after the interviews the researcher would transcribe the interviews and that the participant's identity would not be revealed.
- Ethical issues were discussed regarding confidentiality, management of information, and the research findings, and thus how the researcher would reflect on their stories/experiences. (For an example of the informed consent form that was used, refer to Addendum A - The ethical consent form - attached to this report.)

1.5.2.2 Methods Used for Data Collection

One way of capturing the real life experiences of people is by using narratives or stories as the method of data collection. The terms "stories" and "narratives" are often used interchangeably and will be used as such in this study (East, Jackson, O' Brien & Peters, 2010:17). Jack (2010) refers to storytelling as one of the richest approaches used for data collection in qualitative research; it enables and facilitates a deeper understanding of the personal story or event and the factors surrounding it. For Hendry (2010:72) all inquiry is narrative and he links it to the epistemological roots of human and scientific knowledge. Hendry further argues that the word "narrative" means "to account" and that earliest man sought answers for questions of meaning and knowing by means of narratives. The early Greeks embodied this multiple way of knowing where the concept *knowledge* included both the "episteme" knowledge of the practical everyday and "gnosis" knowledge related to meaning. Hendry (2010:79) therefore sees narrative inquiry as part of the "fabric which shapes and reshapes our social life". Storytelling can thus be used as a basis for research to gain understanding of contextualised human experience (East et al., 2010:18).

In this study, storytelling was facilitated through letter writing, a focus group discussion and five face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Participants were requested to participate in the ***writing of a letter*** (phase one of data collection) in groups comprising two or three participants according to a guideline provided. Themes from these letters were further explored and elaborated upon during one follow-up ***focus group discussion*** (phase two of

data collection). The focus group discussion was guided by an interview guide comprising questions and topics derived from the themes that emerged from the analysis of the letters, as well as new topics introduced by the researcher. With this discussion the researcher sought a richer description of the fourth-year student social workers' practical work training experiences. Finally, five **face-to-face semi-structured interviews** (phase three of data collection), were conducted with a sample of participants purposively selected from the focus group discussion. This storytelling process was conducted at the Bright Site from June 2010 to January 2011.

The researcher used letter writing and **elements of letter writing** (cf. Epston, 1994) **as the means to collect data**. For phase one of the data collection participants were tasked to divide into small groups of two or three and write letters to their loved ones explaining in laymen's terms their experience of their social work practical work training at the Bright Site according to some guiding questions (see questions further on in this section). The researcher's rationale for asking the participants to write letters specifically to loved ones were as follows: The researcher wanted to motivate the participants to write in laymen's terms thus using their own unique words, metaphors and understanding of concepts and as such hoped to prevent vague academic or professional jargons or generalisations. The researcher then extended this "conversation" in phase two during the focus group discussion. This focus group discussion was directed by an interview guide (containing questions) based on amongst other the themes that emerged from the letters which were subsequently reshaped as questions specifically for the focus group discussion. These stories were further extended and explored during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews and for this purpose questions were formulated from the themes that arose from the letter writing as well as the focus group discussion, questions constructed by the participants as invited to do so, and questions formulated by the researcher herself.

Epston (1994:31-39) writes about the power of letter writing as an extension of the therapeutic discussion. The same principle, although adjusted by using *written* semi-structured interview guides drawing on the *participants' stories and words*, could be relevant for research; "[T]he words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness to the work... and immortalising it. ... Letter writing gives privilege [to] the clients' [or participants'] viewpoint in the official record". The participants' could thus bear witness to their own words and experiences through the letters they wrote explaining their experiences in their own words with the subsequent interview guides asking them amongst other things to reflect back on these words and experiences. In this study the researcher thus used some elements of letter writing referred to above in order to extend the conversations from the letters written into a focus group discussion, and finally into five face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Each phase of data collection thus reflected back on the

previous *stories*, inviting the participants to co-interpret these stories and paving the way for new potential dialogues.

The letter writing as a means of storytelling was followed by a ***focus group discussion***. A focus group can be described as a small group of people being brought together to discuss a list of topics and although in traditional focus groups the participants would not have known each other, the researcher was also able to use natural groups, where participants knew each other, as a focus group with the added advantages of providing a more natural setting for the research (Green & Thorogood, 2009:127-129). The focus group was chosen as method of data collection because of its flexibility and the context it sets for getting people's subjective reactions to experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Monette et al., 2008:192). In natural groups, as was the case in this study, the participants knew each other as peers and engaged with one another in the course of their fourth-year social work practical work training at the Bright Site.

The focus group was followed up by ***in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews*** with a sample of students purposively selected from the population. Green and Thorogood (2009:102) describe an in-depth research interview as an interaction, in which the researcher and the participants "produce language data about beliefs, behaviour, ways of classifying the world, or about how knowledge is categorised". The researcher had specific questions to explore but was still free to probe, rephrase or ask questions related to the topic but not necessarily part of the interview guide. Although an interview-guide was provided for the sample of participants engaging in the face-to-face interviews, they were asked to co-construct these questions with the researcher and while this guide was used, the interview itself was also adapted according to the unique unfolding of each interview (cf. Monette et al., 2008:178).

During the analysis of the letters and whilst engaging in the focus group discussions and face-to-face semi-structured interviews the researcher made use of what Freedman and Combs (1996:46) call '***deconstructive listening***' which entails an understanding and acceptance of people's stories "...without reifying or intensifying the powerlessness, painful and pathological aspects of those stories...[a listening that would]...open space for aspects of people's life narratives that haven't yet been storied". Deconstructive listening partially links with Grobler et al's (2003:180) advanced empathy where in this study the researcher facilitated an awareness of the participants' meanings attached to their experiences, or to help each participant to become aware of her/his implied message. In this process the researcher aspired to co-create *with* the participants a much deeper in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and resilience in doing their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context.

The stories of the above experiences and the meanings attached to these experiences are developed or constructed within a given social context. Nicholson (1995:24) quoted White who argued, "The personal story of self-narrative is not radically invented inside our heads. We don't individually make up or invent these stories ...rather; these stories are negotiated and distributed within various communities of persons, and also in institutions of our culture". **Questions** about the participants' experience thus **explored the context** (social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within and ODL context) in which the stories were invented.

Landscape of action and landscape of meaning questions were also used by the researcher in order to explore the experiences, as well as meanings attached to fourth-year student social workers' practical experiences of social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL context. Freedman and Combs (1996:97-98) refer to landscape of action questions as embodied in the "who", "what", "when", "where", and "how" types of questions that facilitated the exploration of the experience, the effect of problems, as well as the community's (or the Service-learning Centre's) influence on the problems. Landscape of meaning questions "reflect on the implications of experienced stories in the landscape of action" (Freedman & Combs, 1996:98). During this process the beliefs, commitments, intentions and desires related to the experience were explored.

The following questions were used as a guide to facilitate the process of letter writing in which the participants had to engage:

Question 1: What is your understanding of a social work practical work placement and what did you do during your social work practical work placement at the Bright Site of Sunnyside?

Question 2: Indicate how your social work practical work placement compared with those of your friends at other organisations by reflecting this in a SWOT analysis.

Question 3: What does "change" mean according to PCA?

Question 4: How did you change this year and what stayed the same?

Question 5: What did you learn about your community?

Question 6: In what way did your community benefit from your involvement with them this year?

Question 7: What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary?

Question 8: Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?

Question 9: Is it really necessary for students to be placed in communities? Please elaborate on your answer.

Question 10: What experiences gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice and what knowledge gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice?

Question 11: How will the experience and knowledge gained influence you in the future?

In the subsequent focus group discussion the researcher extended the “conversation”. The questions used as interview guide for the focus group discussion were based on themes derived from and words used and stories told by participants in their letters. New topics for exploration were also introduced by the researcher in facilitation of a richer description of the fourth-year student social workers’ social work practical work training experiences. The themes that emerged were in most instances reshaped as questions. The following questions were used as a guide for the focus group discussion:

Question 1: From your letters the theme of “change” emerged in that most of you mentioned that you have changed a lot.

- How do you think this year changed the way you think about yourself and your relationships with others?
- What have you discovered about yourself this year that you have not been aware of before?

Question 2: Although this theme did not emerge from your letters, I was wondering if you had to be in charge of the training of social workers at Unisa - referring to your own learning experience - what would you emphasise in this training, how will you do it, what will you change or do differently? (Refer to the content of study guides, PCA theory, social work practical work etc)

Question 3: From the information shared with your loved ones in your letters, the theme of (various) challenges you had to face this year emerged (i.e. financial challenges, issues regarding lack of safety, fear, insecurity and a high work load to mention a few).

- Based on your experiences in this regard, how will you guide new students on how to cope with such challenges? (Please try to be specific in your answers.)

- Emerging from your letters and looking at financial issues, what expenses were you not prepared for this year (identify and link them to costs) and how can you/new students overcome this?

Question 4: From the accounts contained in your letters, the theme of “sacrifice” emerged in that in the past year you had to sacrifice a lot (i.e. time with the people you love, financial costs, and your social life, to mention a few). If you knew then what you know now would you make the same sacrifices?

- If you answered “yes”, elaborate on what made these sacrifices worthwhile for you?
- If you answered “no”, explain your answer and inform me what you would have done differently.

Question 5: Being concerned about your safety, especially when entering the field to do your social work practical work came to the fore as another theme (i.e. many of you entered into and had to work in volatile dangerous communities and were scared, but also managed to keep yourself safe).

- From your experiences gained in this regard what advice would you forward to future students to keep themselves safe? Or to put it differently, what do they need to know and to do to keep themselves safe?

Question 6: Again this question did not emerge as a theme in your letters but in trying to look at Bright Site in relation to other universities and comparing yourself with other students from other universities,

- What do you think made your training and training in the distance environment different?
- In retrospect would you still choose the Unisa context and motivate it?

Question 7: Your letters reflected a very positive picture of the social work practical work placement and I was wondering if there is anything that could be done differently like for example if you could attend a bridging course before final entrance into social work practice what would you include in such a programme? Motivate your answer.

Question 8: Although not reflected in your letters, report writing skills of students are a grave concern for supervisors and lecturers. Your input serves as learning experience for Bright Site and directly affects the training programme of future students. I therefore wondered:

- How and when would you suggest we help students to develop their writing skills?
- What can students do to enhance their own report writing?

Some of the questions for the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were co-constructed

with the participants. (For an outline of these questions, see Chapter Two: Section 2.4.2 - Methods used for data collection). Participants then made a final comment for the purposes of this study by responding back on the transcriptions of their face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The process and contents for exploration in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were thus guided by the participants' input.

1.5.3 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

After data had been collected meanings had to be attached to the information. Creswell (2009:183) refers to data analysis as a process of meaning making related to the data collected which is an ongoing process of analytical reflection on the assembled data. In qualitative studies, researchers will prefer inductive data analysis which will help them identify multiple realities (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:37). In this study the researcher followed a systematic process of data analysis. This process was guided by the following eight steps of Tesch in Creswell (2009:186):

- The researcher read all the transcripts in order to gain a sense of the whole.
- The interview with the richest narrative was then selected in order to determine the essence of the interview. The researcher asked what the implied messages were.
- The same task was completed for several participants. Topics were identified, clustered together into columns, portrayed as major topics, unique topics and surplus or others.
- With this list the researcher revisited the data and abbreviated the topics as codes. These codes were written next to the relevant segments of the text.
- The researcher tried to find the most descriptive wording for the topics and turned this into categories by grouping together those topics that relate to each other.
- A final decision on the abbreviations for each category was made in order to alphabetise the codes.
- The data belonging to each category were placed together to perform a preliminary analysis.
- Some data had to be recoded.

1.5.4 METHODS OF DATA VERIFICATION

Being cognisant of the inductive nature of the data analysis the researcher validated the findings. Gibbs cited by Creswell (2009:190) argues that qualitative validity means that the researcher affirms the accuracy of findings. Reliability refers to the consistency of the researcher's approach across different researchers and projects (Gibbs cited by Creswell, 2009:190).

However issues of reliability and validity can be questioned in qualitative research by asking who verifies and according to which benchmark? In this regard Krefting (1991:214) argues that the concepts reliability and validity are “relative to the quantitative view and do not fit the details of qualitative research”. For Sears (1992:149) the strength of qualitative research therefore rather lies in “its ability to convey the rich language and meanings of others with a willingness to accept the realities of others as given”. Janesick (1994:217) emphasises the uniqueness of qualitative studies by pointing out that “consequently, reliability in the traditional sense is pointless here”. For Krefting (1991:215) the purpose of many qualitative studies will not be to test hypotheses but rather in the final analysis to generate hypotheses for further research.

An objection might be that such research will fall into “relativism” or “subjectivity” and not be “objective”. However, Heshusius (1994:15) would argue that we should free ourselves from the notion of objectivity. She calls for a “participatory mode of consciousness”. This will imply a reordering of our understanding of the relation between the self and other. Participatory consciousness is not a strategy but a mode of consciousness, “the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and known...an inner desire to let go of the perceived boundaries that constitute the ‘self’ ...” (Heshusius, 1994:15). Heshusius argues further that before the scientific revolution the act of knowing had always been understood as a form of participation. The concepts “objectivity” and therefore also “subjectivity” were not known. The implications for this study were that issues of validation and reliability could thus not be separated from the process of knowledge being co-constructed and appreciating the subjective hand of the researcher and participants in the creation of the acquired data and the data analysis.

However Krefting (1991:215) would argue that even within this doubt there is still a need to look at ways to ensure the quality of findings. Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007:38) conclude that the reliability of qualitative studies could be enhanced by addressing the issues of: credibility, dependability, conformability, and exploring ways to confirm that the way the interpretations and concepts are used has mutual meaning for the researcher and participants. The literature on data verification recommends various strategies to enhance the researcher’s and its readers’ ability to access the accuracy of findings. In application of strategies relevant to the study the researcher employed the following:

- Triangulation: Triangulation with specific reference to time triangulation was used where the researcher collected data at different points in time in order to enhance the reliability and/or validity of data (Carpenter, 2007:380-381). In this study the researcher collected data at midyear, before the final evaluations and after the publication of the year end results. The rationale for doing this was to compare and contrast the student social workers’ stories of their social work practical work

experience over time. The researcher also employed triangulation of data methods and data sources. With triangulation of data methods, she employed letter writing, a focus group discussion and face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect the data from the participants. The researcher further collected data from different participants.

- Peer examination: With peer examination the opinions of colleagues and co-workers were sought (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:38). The researcher actively pursued the input, suggestions and comments of colleagues and co-workers who are well-versed in qualitative research. The researcher's study leader is also an expert in qualitative research and mentoring various doctoral and masters' studies, as well as being the principal coordinator of all research done at the Department of Social Work at Unisa.
- Member checking: This strategy was employed by taking the transcripts of the face-to-face interviews back to the participants to check the accuracy of the contents and the meanings attached to the contents and to provide an opportunity for further elaboration (Creswell, 2009:191). A copy of the research findings was presented as a hard copy to the participants in order to clarify the meanings and interpretation in the report.
- Creswell (2009:192) stresses the importance of clarifying the biases the researcher brings into the study, with reflectivity as a core characteristic of qualitative research. In this study the researcher continuously commented on how the findings could have been shaped by her own theoretical, professional and personal background.
- Adding to the credibility of the information Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2007:40-41) suggest the use of crystallisation as practice for validating the results. This practice was used where the researcher considered *other* conflicting interpretations and/or conclusions regarding information collected and analysed. Similar to this process, Creswell (2009:192) suggests that the researcher presents discrepant and/or contradictory information that runs counter to the themes. By exposing these contradictions the accounts become more valid and real. These contradictions were explored with the participants during the face-to face semi-structured interviews, and were highlighted in the report itself.
- Creswell (2009:192) also suggests that the researcher should spend prolonged time in the field in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. The researcher worked with the participants for a period of at least nine months in the actual setting where they did their practical work.
- Regarding the authority of the researcher to enhance the credibility of the findings the following may be pointed out: the researcher attended workshops on qualitative research in view of orientation for marking of research plan grids, draft research reports and final fourth-year social work research reports. Co-presentation/facilitation of qualitative research methodology workshops for fourth-level student social workers for Module SCK410-B were also undertaken. The researcher also conducted

research for oral presentations at ASSASWEI in 2009 and 2010. In qualification of the BA (SS) NDP at UNISA, (1995) a qualitative research project entitled *Teenage sexuality in respect of attitudes and values*, was undertaken.

The impression left by research can seldom if ever be regarded as insignificant or neutral and in this regard Kotze (2002:21) argues that all knowledge “shape[s] life in a significant way”. Per implication all knowledge or actions have an effect and can never be neutral or necessarily beneficial for all. He would challenge knowledge with questions like, who will benefit, who is silenced, who suffers as a result, etc. Thus how data are collected, analysed and verified has direct implications on those affected by the research. In the next section the researcher will give attention to the ethical implications of the study.

1.5.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Kotze (2002:27) distinguishes between knowledge as knowing *about* or knowing *with* and argues: “We cannot know for people what is good for them. We have to know with them.” He calls this “a process of ethicising”. Other than the noun, *ethics*, “ethicising implies an action of doing ethics as a participatory act. It differs from prescriptive ethics, which does not take context into primary consideration and is primarily embedded in systems of truths” (Kotze, 2002:21). Ethicising cannot be done for or about other people but is rather a process where everybody involved and affected, together “negotiate what is a good life for all” (Kotze, 2002:21).

This research could imply that the participants would have gone through a process of change where they had to intimately reflect on their practical experience as fourth-year student social workers doing social work practical work at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context. They would ultimately bear the consequences of the study which could play a role in shaping their professional and personal life. The fine art of ethics will be to find ways on how to apply ethics with those affected by the concern. In this study the researcher applied this process of ethicising in a number of ways.

Finally, although not typically known as an ethical consideration, the researcher used and wants to argue that what Swanepoel and de Beer (2006:208) call “**participatory self-evaluation**” can be regarded as ethics in operation or Kotze’s (2002:21) process of ethicising. Participatory self-evaluation will require participants to continuously evaluate both the process of research as well as the accuracy of the research findings (Swanepoel & de Beer, 2006:208). Although it is within the context of community development, this process of participatory self-evaluation in community development could also be transferred to the context of research. This research occurred in a natural setting of which the context created an environment conducive to *ethicising*. Participatory self-evaluation was part of the ongoing

practices at the Bright Site where students but also participants in the study continuously had to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of their social work practical training. Relevant to this study the participants were asked during the in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews, to explore issues relating to the research as it affected them. The researcher therefore provided the participants with the transcripts of the individual face-to-face interviews and invited them to reflect on the contents of the findings, the way the information was gathered, and also to explore more suitable or other ways of enabled reflection. During the focus group discussion, the questions posed by the researcher acted as a mere guideline and students themselves chose which questions they thought needed to be explored further and on this basis participants omitted certain questions.

Obtaining Informed consent was a further ethical consideration important to this study. As Silverman (2004:271) suggested, informed consent in this study entailed the following:

- The researcher gave the potential participants the relevant information in order to enable them to make a decision on whether or not to participate.
- The researcher further made sure that the prospective participants understood the information and relevant concepts by conversing in English (English is also the language medium of teaching at Unisa).
- Participation was voluntary and confirmed by means of written consent (Refer to Addendum A - The ethical consent form - attached to this report.).

The participants' **right to privacy or confidentiality** as well as **anonymity** were also maintained in this study. These terms are often used interchangeably in research literature. Privacy refers to the participants' ability "to control when and under what conditions others will have access to [their] beliefs, values, or behaviour" (Monette et al., 2008:57). With **anonymity** the participants' identity is protected in that no one would be able to identify any participant afterwards by removing any identifiable information of participants from interview transcripts or quotations used. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:71). Although as previously discussed the participants knew each other as part of their social work practical work training participants had the right and were informed of their right to withdraw from the process if they so wished, with their data then being omitted. All identifying information of participants in relation to the content of the study was kept confidential and anonymous by using alphabetic coding in order to refer to the participants in the groups writing letters as well as the focus group discussion. Pseudonyms were used during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

This confidentiality had implications for the **management of information** and the researcher therefore ensured that audiotape(s) used were coded to disguise any identifying information. The original audiotapes were secured in a locked drawer at the researcher home with accessibility only to the researcher. Upon the completion of the study the audiotapes and the

transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed. The participants also had the right to change their mind at any time during the study and to withdraw consent and discontinue participation.

Monette et al. (2008:61) also points to the fact that research should **avoid harm to or distress** of the participants. Although no harm or distress could be foreseen in this study, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that the interviews could touch on sensitive issues unique to the participant. During one of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews the information shared left the participant feeling emotionally upset, and the researcher subsequently debriefed the participant after the interview.

Following on the above discussion of the research method relating to: the population and sampling, the method of data collection, analysis and verification, as well as the ethical considerations employed in this study, the researcher will now clarify the key concepts that were used in the research project.

1.6 CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

In the section below the key concepts the researcher deems to be central to this study will be defined and clarified. Rubin and Babbie (1993:129) emphasise the importance of what they call “conceptualisation” in order to bring clarity to any discussion. They argue that day-to-day communication mostly occurs through a system of vague and often generalised statements and assumptions of agreements of terms used. Conceptualisation is a means to avoid confusion, where researchers specify what they mean when using a certain term. Although being cognisant of the fact that there might be other interpretations/meanings/understandings of the key concepts used in this study the researcher will proceed to conceptualise her understanding of the key concepts as follows:

- **Open and distance Learning**

Open and distance learning refers to “...a multi- dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, students and academics, students and courseware, and student and peers” (UNISA, 2008:2).

- **Service-Learning**

Although there are various definitions of service-learning the Council on Higher Education (CHE) refers to Bringle and Hatcher as cited by Bender et al. (2006:24) who depict the activity of service-learning as: “A course based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students; Participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community goals.

Reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of source content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.”

The CHE further refers to the Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC) definition of service-learning as “applied learning which is directed at specific community needs and is integrated into an academic programme and curriculum” (Bender et al.,2006:24)

For McPherson (n.d.) the concept service-learning emphasise both service and learning, by applying classroom content to community settings [to the benefit of both learning and service].

Although also similar a service-learning placement in the context of this study differs from the traditional social work practical work placement at recognised workplaces in that the beneficiary is the student as well as the community and the goal is both service and learning.

- **Community Engagement**

According to the CHE community engagement is a “strategy in the transformation of higher education in relation to community development priorities” (CHE, 2004[a]: 130). In Unisa’s 2015 Strategic Plan, (Unisa, 2005:6) the *Community Engagement Policy* of Unisa is based on the definition of the CHE (2004:24) in its *Criteria for Institutional Audits* which refers to community engagement as: “Initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community. Community engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at particular community needs”.

Community engagement is further conceptualized as a continuum “determined by two important distinctions: (1) who the primary *beneficiaries* of the service are (i.e. community or student); and (2) what the primary *goal* of the service is (i.e. community service or student learning)” (CHE, 2004[a]:130).

In the context of this study the process of community engagement will be facilitated by using the expertise of Unisa in the areas of tuition and research to address issues relevant to the community and to the mutual benefit of the community and the university.

- **Social Work**

The International Federation of Social Workers defines social work as a profession which promotes social change and the problem solving skills of people in relationships. Social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environment using theories on human

behaviour and social systems with human rights and social justice as guiding and fundamental principles (IFSW, 2000). Baker as cited by Zastrow (2010:3) refers to the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) definition of social work as follows: "Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favourable to their goals ...[its] practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends; helping people obtain tangible services; providing counselling and psychotherapy for individuals, families and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in relevant legislative processes. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behaviour, of social, economic, and cultural institutions; and the interaction of all these factors."

- **Student**

A student according to the *TheFreeDictionary* (2011) is someone who is following a course or study in a school, college or university (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/student>). Soanes, Spooner and Hawker (2001:901) expand on this definition, as also relevant to this study, as someone studying to enter a profession.

- **Student Social Worker**

The term student social worker is restricted in terms of the Social Service Professions Act, 1978, as amended. In terms of regulation 2 of the Regulations regarding the Registration of student social workers and the holding of disciplinary inquiries, all students from their second year of practice training must be registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions before the title student social worker may be used. (Regulations regarding the Registration of student social workers and the holding of disciplinary inquiries, 2011:R 102)

- **Social worker**

"The term generally applies to graduates of bachelor's- or masters'- level social work programs who are employed in the field of social welfare. A social worker is a change agent who is skilled at working with individuals, groups, families, organisations and communities" (Zastrow, 2010:38). Within the South African context "a social worker refers to a "person registered and authorised in accordance with section 17 of the Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978 as amended (Act No. 110 of 1978). A student registered for Social work from second level must also register with the Council for Social Service Professions as 'Student Social Worker' (Unisa, 2010:61)

- **Supervision**

According to the Department of Social Development (2006:20-21) in South Africa “Supervision is a management function which is evaluative, extends over time and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of a social worker through skills transfer, mentoring, and professional support; monitoring the quality of professional services offered to service recipients and motivating social workers to achieve their full potential in line with client and organisational goals”. Kadushin (1992:20) distinguishes between the short and long term objectives of supervision. The short term objectives of educational supervision are to enhance the worker’s capacity to work effectively, to grow and develop as a professional, and to enhance her/his work related knowledge and skills towards working autonomously. The long term objectives of supervision are to provide efficient and effective social work services to the service beneficiaries. The supervisor will therefore on the level of administration coordinate and integrate supervisees’ work within the agency, educate workers to be efficient and effective in their task performance and lastly support and sustain workers in the performance of their tasks.

- **Supervisor**

According to Zastrow (2010:27) a supervisor “...seeks to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of services through supervising other staff”. For the Department of Social Development South Africa (2006:20-21) supervisors should have the ability to manage the administrative, educational and supportive functions of social workers so that an enabling and conducive environment is created for effective work performance.

- **Student social work supervisor at Unisa**

According to the Administrative Guide for Unisa Supervisors and Contact persons a student social work supervisor at Unisa should be in possession of at least a four-year degree in social work with relevant practice experience (Department of Social Work – Unisa, 2009:1-10). Within this guide it is further noted that the supervisor’s task is not only to assist the student to know and understand the theory, but also to facilitate the application of the knowledge to specific situations in practice. Concrete situations provided through workshops and practical work placements, are excellent opportunities for the student to link theory and practice. Students learn by doing, seeing, experiencing, and through reflecting, incorporating, and through integration of theory, knowledge, skills and practice.

- **Social work practical training and practical placements**

The Bachelor of Social Work is a professional degree that requires various skills, and the ability to practically and meaningfully integrate theory and practice. Training at Unisa's Department of Social Work, needs to meet the practical work requirements set out by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) and the Standards Generating Body of Social Work (SGB). Practical placements or field placements must be provided for students to conduct their practical training in social work. A practical work placement is a setting or context where fourth level students are placed for the completion of the practical work component of the BSW degree at Unisa. This setting is usually a non-profit organisation, an office of the Department of Social Development, or any other setting where professional social services are provided (Lawlor, 2008:19). Students at Unisa are also placed at newly developed Service-learning Centres (i.e. the Bright Sites in Sunnyside as well as Durban) for their social work practical work training as relevant to this study.

Practical work at Unisa, as outlined in the Administrative Guide for Unisa Supervisors and Contact Persons (Department of Social Work – Unisa, 2009:1-10), entails the following:

- Practical work training is formally supported and structured by study guides, assignments, workshops, portfolios, the core concepts, theories, and techniques which are regarded as the foundation of practice.
- Practical work where supervisors, facilitators, and contact persons to mentor students are appointed by Unisa.
- Supervision as part of the practical work is aligned to Unisa's curriculum, outcomes, and in line with the theoretical basis of the Department of Social Work's values, and the ethical code for social workers.
- Practical work further entails supervising, guiding, assessing and mentoring students in fulfilling specified outcomes relating to social work practical work.

- **Experiences**

An experience can be defined as an event which leaves an impression on a person (Soanes et al., 2001:311). From a PCA perspective experience will be referred to as an umbrella term for all needs, behaviour, emotions and values of a person and that these experiences cannot be separated from one another (Grobler et al., 2003:45).

- **Manager**

As mentioned in this study the researcher was also the manager of the Service-learning component of the Bright Site. The researcher's role of manager resonated with how

Weinbach (2008:5) conceptualise the term manager and management: “A manager would be the person in an organisation who is responsible to build and maintain an environment conducive for effective service delivery to clients with management as the “various ways of shaping and exerting an influence over the work environment” which would imply “taking charge, not simply allowing events to happen”.

The researcher further wants to clarify the key concepts regarding the National Higher Education bodies that informed and regulated the social work practical work training of the participants, thus the fourth year student social workers, at the Bright Site within Unisa as ODL University. These relevant concepts can be depicted as follows in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 The National Higher Education Bodies which inform and regulate Unisa as ODL University with the Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting for fourth year student social workers

Council on Higher Education (CHE)	This Council was established in May 1998 in terms of the Higher Education Act (act No. 101 of 1997) with the following responsibilities: To - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advise the Minister of Education on all policy issues • be responsible for quality assurance and quality promotion regarding higher education and training • contributing to the development of higher education • monitor the state of the Higher Education (CHE, 2008-2009:7).
Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC)	The HEQC is the permanent committee of the CHE with the executive responsibility for the quality promotion and quality assurance in higher education (CHE, 2008 -2009:14).
South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)	SAQA is the body responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework which was established by the SAQA Act (Act No. 58 of 1995) (SAQA, 2006[b]).
National Qualifications Framework (NQF)	The NQF Act (Act No. 67 of 2008) replaces the SAQA Act (Act No. 58 of 1995) with the NQF’s objectives being the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designing an integrated national framework for learning attainment • facilitating access, mobility and progression within education, training and career paths • improving the quality of education and training • restoring past unfair discrimination in education, training

	and employment opportunities (SAQA, 2006[c] & SAQA, 2006[d]).
Standards Generating Body of Social Work (SGB)	The SGB was a registered body in terms of the SAQA Act (Act No. 58 of 1995) responsible for establishing training and education standards. This act was replaced by the NQF Act, Act No. 67 of 2008 which phased the SGBs out (SAQA, 2006[a] and SAQA, 2006[b]).
South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP)	The SACSSP is a statutory body who in accordance with the Social Service Professions Act (Act No.110 of 1978 as amended) regulates the Social Services Professions through two boards one relevant to this study is the Professional Board for social work (http://www.sacssp.co.za/index.php?pageID=31&pagename=/ABO_UT-US/)

1.7 CHAPTER-WISE OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

The research report will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1 will provide an introduction and general orientation to the research report with specific focus on the following: introduction and problem formulation, problem statement, rationale for the study, research question, goal and objectives, research approach and design, ethical considerations, limitations of the research, clarification of key concepts, and the content plan of the research report.

In chapter 2 the researcher's application of the qualitative research process will be presented.

In Chapter 3 the research findings will be presented and subjected to a literature control.

In chapter 4 the research report will be summarised, with an outline of the overall conclusions and recommendations.

1.8 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The preceding chapter presented the reader with an introduction and general orientation to this research report by providing a general introduction, problem formulation and motivation for the study. This was followed by a depiction of the research question, as well as the primary goal and objective(s) for the research endeavour undertaken. An outline of the research methodology proposed to be employed in this study was provided with reference to the qualitative research approach and the philosophical underpinnings of this research approach. The researcher further provided an overview of the research design and method

used and the ethical considerations relevant to this study. The key concepts central to this study were clarified as well as a chapter-wise outline of the research report provided.

In the chapter to follow, the researcher will describe how the research methodology was applied in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

A DESCRIPTION OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS AND ITS APPLICATION FOR INVESTIGATING FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE-LEARNING CENTRE OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One of this research report a research plan was provided outlining the envisaged research methodology to be used for investigating the topic under discussion.

The aim of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre, whilst enrolled at an ODL university. The research was conducted within the context of the Bright Site. This centre provides a field placement or context where fourth level student social workers are placed for the completion of the required social work practical work component of the Bachelor of Social Work at (BSW) Unisa. The exit level outcomes set for the BSW degree in South Africa, as stipulated by the South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], necessitate such practical training (SAQA., 2006).

By being the most affordable university in South Africa (cf. Kilfoil cited in Schenck, 2009:299) and fulfilling its critical social mandate in serving people who, for various reasons, would otherwise not have access to tertiary education (cf. Unisa, 2008[a]:15), Unisa attracts large numbers of students.

This increase in student numbers filters through to the Department of Social Work at Unisa and challenges this department to increase the number and contexts of practical placements where fourth level student social workers can do their social work practical work training as part of the requirements for their BSW degree as referred to above. For the year 2010 Unisa's Department of Social Work had a total of 389 fourth-year students requiring practical placements (Unisa, 2010[a]). For such social work practical work training social work students are traditionally placed in non-profit organisations, offices of the Department of Social Development or any other setting where professional social services are provided and which caters for student social workers to do their social work practical work training (Lawlor, 2008:19). However, due to the increase in the number of students requiring placements for doing their social work practical work training, these contexts referred to above find it increasingly difficult to accommodate students. Many of these practice settings are faced with

and challenged by limited capacities, a lack of resources, and a scarcity of social workers who are responsible for monitoring and supervising the social work practical work rendered by the student social workers (Van Dyk, 2010).

The Department of Social Work at Unisa had not only to rethink the social work practical work training but had also to make it fit within the open and distance learning environment – a task which presented its own challenges. Although Unisa has very lenient admission requirements the expectations that students will succeed are not lowered (Unisa, 2008[a]:27). In comparing an ODL tertiary institution with a residential tertiary institution the most obvious difference between the two is that students at the latter have the luxury of constant and immediate face-to-face contact with lecturers. With Unisa, as ODL institution, this is not the case and measures must be taken in this milieu to help the students succeed, and to bridge the barriers and distance between students and the learning institution and to enhance the access necessary to facilitate success (Unisa, 2008:2).

The challenges inherent in the broader social work landscape and the unique challenges related specifically to an open and distance learning environment (articulated in the previous two paragraphs) ignited a process of critical reflection on the traditional social work practical work placement settings and led to the development and establishment of the Bright Site by the Department of Social Work at Unisa in 2008. The development of the centre was seen as a constructive response to challenges that needed to be addressed with regard to the demand for social work practical work placement settings outnumbering those available for the practical training of student social workers (Van Dyk, 2010).

This Service-learning Centre has been in operation for two years. The researcher and Unisa's Department of Social Work increasingly became aware of the need to critically assess the learning experiences of students. The researcher subsequently embarked on this study with the aim of uncovering the experiences of fourth-year student social workers who did their social work practical training at the Service-learning Centre.

In an effort to realise this aim and to provide an answer to the research question formulated at the outset of this study (see Chapter 1: Section 1.2) the researcher had to choose a method or approach best suited to answering the research question and addressing the purpose of the research. Within the context of research, the concept "methodology" refers to the choices a researcher makes in determining how a phenomenon will be studied. It refers essentially to how data will be collected and analysed (Silverman, 2004:4). Gelo, Braakman and Benetka (2008:269) reflect on the concept of "research methodology" and argue that the researcher's decision on how to embark on any investigation is dependent on "a set of philosophical and meta-theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and the principles inspiring and governing scientific investigation

(methodology), as well as technical issues regarding the practical implementation of a study (research methods)". In this study the researcher decided to employ a qualitative research approach as the characteristics of a qualitative research approach are by nature and function mainly explorative and descriptive (cf. Marshall and Rossman in Ritchie & Lewis, 2005:28) and therefore dovetailed with the objectives formulated for this study (see Chapter 1: Section 1.2). In the remainder of this chapter the researcher will unpack the qualitative research approach, design and method and how it was implemented during the investigation of the research topic under discussion.

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

It is commonly accepted that qualitative research as the approach employed in this research endeavour, is situated within the post-modern or post-positivist, social construction paradigm (Burck, 2005:242). Mark (1996:206) refers to a paradigm as a collected set of beliefs or convictions about the nature of things, which determines how we view the world, ourselves and our relationship to it.

The post-positivist paradigm could be regarded as a conversation that extends beyond the time of positivism from which quantitative research stems. Positivism argues that the world exists independently from people's perceptions and that scientists can use objective tools and techniques in order to study a world "out there" (Monette, Sullivan & DeJong, 2008:224). Seen through a quantitative lens, the purpose of quantitative research would amongst others be to test hypotheses, establish facts, predict outcomes and generalise results to specific populations (Nicholls, 2009:591). However, the assumption underlying a post-positivist, social construction paradigm is that there is not "one" reality but "multiple" realities and this "reality" or these "realities" as we know it/them is/are not absolute but rather socially constructed and how we make meaning of the world is not an inevitable result of our greater understanding of "reality" but rather the result of "historical, social and political processes" (Green & Thorogood, 2009:15).

In an attempt to distinguish between the qualitative and the quantitative approach to research Rolfe (2006: 307-309) takes a different stance and warns against the over simplistic and generalised attribution of characteristics as an either or qualitative or quantitative trait belonging to a certain paradigm. Some qualitative methodologies might be founded upon the same philosophical criteria as the quantitative approach and vice versa. For example: the activity to critically reflect on the independent coding conducted (as strategy for qualitative data verification) also fits equally, if not better, within a positivistic paradigm. The assumption underlying this activity is that the independent coder can *ultimately verify a truth*. Not fully unpacked or taken into account is the way the independent coder and researcher will phrase and/or use specific language to depict a storyline. How the themes, sub-themes, categories

etc. are identified and phrased, which will inevitably impact on the meaning of the story-line and still remain the interpreted version of the independent coder, are not always depicted. One then ought to ask questions such as: what about other interpretations of the same data? How could one prevent these interpretations from being marginalised? In this study the researcher tried to compensate by also asking the participants to verify the accuracy of the account of their stories as transcribed by the researcher and asking them what they regard as the themes and important storylines. However the researcher is still cognisant of the fact that this process of identifying storylines with their subsequent themes and interpretation is temporarily bound to time, context and persons. Rolfe (2006:307-309) argues that the distinction between the qualitative and quantitative approach should be made rather on the basis of data collection methods than on paradigm or the underlying philosophies inherent in these approaches.

Subsequent to being informed by Rolfe's (2006:307-309) insights referred to above, the researcher became aware of the fact that she did not follow "a purist postmodern" or "post-positivist philosophical approach" in the true sense. She realised and therefore acknowledged that certain methods adopted in this research process, such as the use of an independent coder and the process of data analysis where data were categorised according to themes based on the *essence* of an interview and the questions and prompts that focused the latter, were more appropriate to a positivist paradigm. Such a search for essence gives privilege to the understandings and interpretations of the independent coder with the added danger that the search for *essence* might neglect other marginalised meanings.

In view of the fact that the aim of this study was orientated towards discovery (i.e. to explore), the post-modern, post-positivist and social construction outlook which mostly informs the qualitative research approach allowed for and assumed that the process of discovery had to be based on those people who experienced the phenomenon under study within their own very specific and natural context (Barroso, 2010:86). The qualitative approach adopted for this study therefore enhanced, supported and guided processes towards the attainment of the goal that was set for the study (see Chapter 1: Section 1.2).

The qualitative research approach, according to its nature and characteristics as described in Chapter 1: Section 1.3.1, seemed to be a fitting match for investigating the research topic under discussion as it afforded an opportunity and facilitated a process whereby students could explore and describe their experiences of social work practical work training at the Bright Site as well as the meanings they attached to these experiences. In the ensuing discussion the design strategy, methods of data collection, analysis and verification inherent in the qualitative research approach will be discussed along the lines of how they were implemented in this research endeavour.

2.3 DESIGN STRATEGY

The research design guides the researcher in answering the research question and executing the research. In implementing the design, Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:89) argue that the researcher attempts to find answers to the research question and this could be regarded as a response to a range of decisions about how best to answer the research question. For Barroso (2010:90) the research design decided upon should be congruent with the philosophical beliefs underpinning the chosen research approach. In applying this viewpoint to the research project under discussion, the researcher took notice of the fact that in qualitative research (which is in essence a natural inquiry), the research design is not fixed in stone, but is evolving in nature, fluid and flexible with the sampling method being purposeful (Patton, 2002). In considering the most suitable research design fitting with the purpose and context of the study, the researcher employed an ***explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry***.

In view of what was stated in Chapter One about exploratory research it became clear that the aim of explorative research is to explore an unknown phenomenon or an ill-researched topic (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996:92-93). Since the experiences of fourth level students, pertaining to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in the ODL context of Unisa had not previously been researched, the present study incorporated the exploratory research design as strategy of inquiry. The descriptive research design was incorporated because the aim of this design is to provide a detailed description of what is explored (Neuman, 2006: 20). According to Alpaslan (2010:17) explorative and descriptive research can be viewed in a process-product relationship. The study therefore first explored (process) and then described (product) that which had been explored. Descriptive research builds on and complements the explorative part in that it seeks for a better understanding of "what is" (Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996:93). The study further asked questions relating to why the experience was the way the students described it and what influenced such experiences. (Refer to Addendums B, C and D pertaining to the interview guides attached to this report.)

With reference to contextual research, Marshall and Rossman (in Ritchie & Lewis, 2005:28) note that the explorative and descriptive functions of qualitative research are both key features of contextual research. Contextual research, to quote Ritchie and Lewis (2005:27), "is concerned with identifying *what* exists in the social world [i.e. a specific content] and the way it manifests itself. A major feature of qualitative methods is their ability to describe phenomena as experienced by purposively selected participants (sample), in great detail and in the participants' own terms". According to Alpaslan (2010:17), qualitative research affords the researcher a context where issues can be "unpack(ed), to see what they are about or what lies inside, and to explore and describe how they are understood by those connected with them". In view of the fact that qualitative research concerns itself with exploring a phenomenon, issue, problem or experience within a specific context and describing the

former against the context in which it manifests itself, the researcher incorporated the contextual strategy of inquiry as part of the chosen research design.

Recalling the fact that phenomenological research concerns itself with uncovering what the unique, particular world-view and experience of a person is in relating to a specific phenomenon (Crabtree & Miller, 1999:25 and Nicholls, 2009:586), the researcher also included the phenomenological research design as strategy of inquiry.

The next step in the research process was to decide who the participants or informants would be and this relates to the aspects of “population” and “sampling”. Streubert Speziale and Carpenter (2007:29) argue that the concept “participant” or “informant”, rather than “subject” as commonly found in qualitative research, indicates what status those studied play in the research process. In this study the fourth-year student social workers were not passive subjects being studied, but they were actively involved in the research (i.e. participants), initiators of the data, clarifying meanings of data acquired and co-creating questions for further exploration.

2.3.1 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Decisions about who would participate in this study were based on identifying the population and subsequent sampling against the pointers of qualitative sampling to be espoused in the ensuing discussion. The concept “population” refers to all the possible cases with specific characteristics relevant to the study one is interested in studying (Monette et al., 2008:136). As mentioned in Chapter One the population comprised eighteen participants who displayed the following characteristics²:

- They had to be fourth level student social workers.
- They had to be enrolled for and have completed their social work practical work training, for the duration of February 2010 to September 2010.
- They had to be students who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service-learning Centre in an ODL context.

In view of the fact that the population totalled only 18 students/participants, the researcher decided to include the whole population (i.e. the 18 fourth level students who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site), in phases one (letter writing) and two (focus group discussion) of the process of data collection³. However, out of this population the number of participants involved in phases one and two of the data collection process totalled 11, as personal circumstances (i.e. illnesses, deaths in family etc) and social work practical

² These characteristics were also used as the criteria for inclusion as participants in this study

³ The phases of data collection were introduced in Chapter 1, Section 1.2, 1.5.1, 1.5.2.2: and will be further elaborated upon in Section 2.4.2 in this chapter).

work obligations prevented the total populations from being involved in both of the phases. From this population five⁴ participants were sampled for phase three (face-to-face semi-structured interviews) of the data collection process⁵.

Sampling refers to the methods used by which a certain number of people are selected from the target population (Orme & Shemmings, 2010:118). In familiarising herself with the aspect of “qualitative sampling”, the researcher learned from Murphy and Dingwall (2003:105) that qualitative research opts for “depth not [primarily] breadth” in sampling selection. Therefore, qualitative samples are smaller (cf. Maree and Pietersen in Maree, 2007:177) and the qualitative researcher is cognisant of the fact that some participants are “information-rich” and have a better ability to provide a deeper and richer description of the specific topic, phenomenon or experienced being studied. The researcher therefore opted to choose participants purposively by employing the purposive sampling method⁶. As Fossey et al. (2002:726) would suggest, the rationale behind choosing participants purposefully for inclusion in this study did not lie in the intention to generalise data but rather to create an in-depth understanding derived from someone with first-hand experience of the phenomenon, topic, or experience under study. Based on the aforementioned trains of thought the researcher not only selected the sample of participants purposefully for phase three of the data collection, but the parameters of the population were also very purposefully and specifically demarcated and simultaneously served as criteria for the inclusion of participants in this study (as described earlier under this section). The rationale for purposively selecting participants for phase three (face-to-face semi-structured interviews) of the data collection was twofold:

- Firstly, the researcher was of the view that these participants (who had experienced the social work practical work training received at the Bright Site themselves) would be in the best position to further elaborate and complement the data collected (in phases one and two of the data collection) around their and their fellow students’ experiences relating to their social work practical work training at the said Centre.
- Secondly, these participants would further clarify the meanings they and their fellow classmates attached to their experiences as articulated in the data obtained from phases one and two of the data collection process.

Apart from the criteria of inclusion stipulating who would be included in the population for this study for the data collection in phases one and two (the whole population), the following

⁴ The researcher and the supervisor concluded after five participants were interviewed in phase three of the data collection, that data saturation had been reached and it was not necessary to include more participants in the sample.

⁵ The phase of data collection was introduced in Chapter 1, Section 1.2, 1.5.1, 1.5.2.2: and will be further elaborated upon in Section 2.4.2 in this chapter).

⁶ Purposive sampling as sampling method is common in qualitative research where participants are selected on the basis of their first-hand experience of the phenomenon of interest and relevant to the study (Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2007:29).

criteria of inclusion and exclusion were added for considering who among the population would be included and excluded in phase three of the data collection:

- Students had to take part in phase one (thus had to be part of a group writing a letter to a loved one describing her/his social work practical work training experience at the Service-learning Centre) of the process of data collection.
- Students had to take part in phase two (focus group discussion) of the process of data collection as additional criterion for inclusion.
- Students who were therefore absent for various reasons during either of the first two phases of data collection were excluded from being selected for inclusion in the sample for phase three of the data collection.

The sample size (with special reference to the number of participants to be included in phase three of the data collection – i.e. the face-to-face semi-structured interviews) was not predetermined in this study but the principle of data saturation guided the sample size. Data saturation would mean that the researcher would look for repetition of information and collected data rather than sampling on the basis of statistical manipulation (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter, 2007:31). Barroso (2010:91) argues that qualitative research has no set sample size but data are collected to the point of saturation, which means the information shared by participants become repetitive. Gibbs, Kealy, Willis, Green, Welch and Daly (2007:542) argue that at this point when data becomes repetitive and no new themes emerge, data saturation is achieved and it would be appropriate to cease collecting further data.

2.4 DATA COLLECTION AND FIELDWORK STRATEGIES

In deciding upon the how, what, where, and when of data collection the researcher focused on pointers for data collection and field work strategies in the research methodology literature relating to qualitative research. The researcher learnt data collection in qualitative research aims for: an in-depth inquiry, the personal engagement of the researcher with the study and participants, the empathic stance of the researcher in order to understand and not judge, and assumes that systems are dynamic and ever changing (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the method(s) chosen for data collection in qualitative research need to be informed by the research goal, the circumstances in which the study will be conducted and the participant and community sympathies (Gibbs et al., 2007:543).

In the discussion to follow the researcher will elaborate on how the participants from the population and the sample were prepared for the different phases of data collection, the methods of data collection employed in the different phases of data collection, and the interviewing skills employed during the different phases of data collection.

2.4.1 PREPARATION FOR DATA COLLECTION

In order to create a context in which the researcher could facilitate the initial exploration and consequent description of the participants' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL context, the participants had to be prepared for data collection. This preparation was executed not only on a concrete but also on an abstract level where the preparation was embedded in a purposively fostered culture at the Bright Site.

Firstly, the researcher had to gain entry into the field or context where the students did their social work practical work. This was not a demanding exercise in itself because the researcher was also the manager of the service-learning component at Bright Site and was amongst others directly involved in the teaching and learning of the students who formed the population and later became the participants in this study. However, apart from already enjoying a learning and teaching relationship with the said population, the researcher had to establish a relationship for the purpose of conducting the research project and was therefore reminded of Feldman, Bell and Berger (2003:35) who mention the importance of gaining and maintaining trust with the participants in the research process. Having direct contact with the participants does not necessarily constitute trust. Feldman et al. (2003:36) further talk about commitment acts which help to foster this trust. Commitment acts refers to the researcher demonstrating the willingness to learn from and listen to the participants, thus actively respecting their worthiness to be heard. In this study the researcher was sensitive about the fact that developing a trusting relationship for the purpose of conducting research could have been hindered by the current role held by the researcher, namely that of manager/teacher at the Bright Site and the newly allocated and emerging role of that as researcher. In order to limit the hindrance relating to the researcher's current and emergent role at the Bright Site, an open, honest relationship characterised by trust and free-flowing communication was initiated and facilitated by engaging with students in a person centred fashion. The teaching and learning philosophy of the Bright Site is embedded in the Person Centred approach which emphasises student centredness primarily through participation (Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008:6). In the course of the social work practical work training year, which started in the first week of February 2010 and lasted until the end of September 2010, the day-to-day practices of Bright Site continuously included participatory evaluation of all learning activities. According to Schenk, Nel and Louw (2010:222), participatory evaluation is not just about participants providing data about outcomes but is intended to enhance their understanding of the outcomes. This approach further dovetails with Unisa 's Tuition Policy (Unisa, 2005[a]:2, 5) which emphasises constant critical reflection and encourages students "to be active, engaged and involved participants in their own learning process, reflecting on what and how they learn, and making connections to the workplace and to their broader communities". Therefore in this research the students were familiar with an ongoing process of action-

reflection–planning, where students continuously reflected on their own learning but also on all activities related to the learning process. This process of continuous action-reflection planning is similar to what Schön (1995:40) would call “reflection in action” which is a type of “on-the-spot” inquiry about an action undertaken which is more than just a trial and error exercise. This ongoing process of action-reflection–planning was facilitated in such a way that students reflected on their practical work according to curriculum based theory which guided their practice, with the primary aim of enhancing learning and professional development. When this evaluation proved a specific action or learning experience to be inefficient or not benefiting the students (also participants), the process of action-reflection-planning as suggested by Schenk et al. (2010:220) was used to make appropriate modifications and establish a new plan of action. (In support of this practice refer also to Chapter 3: paragraph 3.3.1.6 of this report relating to participants’ experience of the application of PCA at Bright Site.) Participatory evaluation was used as a tool to facilitate not only ownership of the practical training but also trust in the research process. This process demonstrated, as Feldman et al. (2003:36) also mentioned, the willingness from not only the researcher but also Bright Site to connect with the students, listen to them, and communicate their worthiness to be trusted. The relationship between the researcher and participants as well as preparing the participants for the study was thus embedded in a culture and day-to-day practices of critical discourse, participation and student centredness. Apart from critical evaluation being part of the day-to-day practices of the students at Bright Site, the participants were prepared for their involvement in this specific study by means of a meeting. During this meeting the researcher prepared the participants according to the guidelines provided by Rogers and Bouey (in Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, 1996:65-66) and gave attention to the following:

- *Explain the purpose of the research:* The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants as a study which aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers’ experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL university.
- *Explain to them why you want them in particular to participate in your study:* The researcher further clarified why these students in particular had been chosen to participate in the study (for phases one and two of the data collection all 18 students enrolled for practical training at the Bright Site could be included). The primary reason was that they as students had first-hand experience and knowledge about doing their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within the ODL context of Unisa. From the students who formed part of phases one and two of the data collection a sample was drawn for participating in the third phase of data collection.
- *Explain the value of their participation and contribution to the study:* The value of the study was explained within the bigger context and rationale for developing the Bright Site. This was explained as follows: In response to high student numbers, limited practical placement

opportunities for fourth-year student social workers, as well as challenges faced in an open and distance environment, the Bright Site was initiated not as an alternative approach (to traditional practical placements as discussed in Chapter 1: paragraph 1.1), but rather an along-side social work practical work training setting for student social workers. Since the Bright Site in Sunnyside had been in operation for two years (from October 2008), the Department of Social Work at Unisa (as primarily responsible for the project) had a need to reflect on the experiences of the students and communities who ought to ultimately benefit from the project (cf. Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008:11). The focus of this study was on the students and their lived experiences of their practical training. The value of the study would thus be to gain an in-depth understanding of the fourth-year student social workers' practical training experience at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL university. The knowledge gained from this study would directly inform future planning (a similar Service-learning Centre was at the time envisaged for Durban but was subsequently launched in 2011) and practices at the Centre.

- *Explain to them how the data will be collected and what will be asked of them* (provide them with the guidelines/prompts/questions in advance that you would like them to respond/provide answers to). As stated in Chapter One (and to be further elaborated upon in this chapter) the data collection were done in three phases. For phase one of the data collection the participants were requested to write a letter, in groups of three or two, as if to a loved one, explaining their social work practical work training experience in lay-man's terms. A guideline comprising questions and prompts for drafting these letters was provided to the participants (see Addendum B: *A guideline on how and what to focus on in compiling a letter to a loved one explaining to them what your social work practical work training entailed*). Based on the themes derived from analysis of these letters (used in phase one of the data collection process), the participants were provided with a guideline with topics/questions for the focus group discussion, as phase two of the process of data collection (see Addendum C: *A guideline with topics/questions to structure the focus group discussion*). The questions for the face-to-face semi-structured interviews (phase three of data collection), conducted with a sample of participants (purposively chosen from the population who took part in phases one and two of the data collection), were also given to the participants prior to the interviews in order to elaborate, complement and further explore in more depth the themes which emerged as a result from the process of data analysis of the prior two phases of data collection (see Addendum D: *An interview guide with prompts and questions for phase three of data collection: face-to-face semi-structured interviews*). However, for phase three, apart from an interview guide provided by the researcher, the participants also generated their own topics and constructed questions on issues they wished to be explored or further explored during the face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews.
- *Inform them where the interviews will take place*: The researcher negotiated and clarified with the participants where the interviews would take place. The most convenient and most fitting place for the purposes of this study was the Unisa, Vudec Building which was the

natural setting of the Bright Site where the participants did most of their day-to-day-social work practical work and training (except for group work and community work, which were done in various communities in and around Pretoria)..

- *Indicate to them the time of the interviews and how long the research activities (i.e. the letter writing, focus group discussion and interviews) will take:* Although the exact time the participants would spend on the processes of data collection could not be predetermined at the outset of the study, it was negotiated during the course of the fieldwork. On completion of the study, the participants indicated that the letter writing (i.e. compiling a letter to a loved one about their social work practical work experience at the Bright Site) took most participants approximately four hours per group (students divided themselves according to their own preferences into groups of two but not more than three). The focus group discussion lasted two hours and this was also the time frame stated at the outset of the research. The individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour each, although 90 minutes had been agreed upon with the participants.
- *Inform them about record keeping during the process of data collection:* In order for the researcher to focus, with undivided attention, on the participants and to not lose important information shared by them, the researcher negotiated various record keeping practices with the participants. It was agreed with the participants that they submit a copy of the letters written about their practical training experience to the researcher. The focus group discussion was organised so that the participants divided into small groups (in the context of this study also called “brainstorming groups”) of three to four participants, in order to share their experiences according to a guideline provided. Each small group or brainstorming group kept notes of each question that they delved into and submitted these original notes to the researcher. For the semi-structured face-to-face interviews the participants’ consent was gained to tape-record the discussions, which were subsequently transcribed.
- *Inform them how the data collected will be managed and discuss the ethical issues of confidentiality, and management of information (i.e. where you will keep the written records, taped interview, what will happen with it once you have transcribed the interview and the research findings, how you will reflect their stories/experiences and the information that they have shared in your research report).* As discussed in Chapter 1: paragraph. 1.5.5 of this report, the participants were informed that the researcher would transcribe the individual interviews and that the participant’s identity would not be revealed by using either pseudonyms or a numbering system. The same was applicable for the letter writing exercise as well as the focus group discussion. Participants also had the right and were informed of their right to withdraw from the process if they so wished. Audiotapes were secured in a locked drawer at the researcher’s home with only the researcher having access to it. Participants were informed that upon completion of the study the audiotapes and the transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed. Ethical issues of confidentiality, management of information, and the research findings, thus how the researcher would reflect on the stories/experiences shared by the participants, was also discussed. (Refer to Chapter 1:

paragraph. 1.5.5 of this report as well as the discussion of ethical considerations in this chapter.)

Although the study was closely embedded in the culture and day-to-day practices of the participant's practical training at the Bright Site, preparing the students as participants in the study was still vital in order for them to give informed consent. This preparation as discussed above then paved the way for data collection. The methods of data collection employed will now become the focus of attention.

2.4.2 METHODS USED FOR DATA COLLECTION

The data collection methods used in this study acted as an enabler in developing an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre at an ODL university. As typical in qualitative research, data collection methods privileged the voice of the participants (Fossey et al., 2002:719). Data collection methods used in this study were guided by a narrative inquiry, which for the purposes of this study was understood as an approach to data collection that allows for participants to tell their stories, from their frame of reference, as is, and in a way that enhanced a richer description of experiences and the meanings they attached to them (Jack, 2010:5). The assumption underpinning this narrative inquiry is that all inquiry is narrative and is part of that which constitutes and reconstitutes our daily practices and understandings of them (Hendry, 2010:72 & 79). These narratives about participants' social work practical training experiences in the relevant context of the study, were collected by means of letter writing (five letters written by eleven students ⁷working in groups of two or three), one focus group discussion with eleven participants, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a sample of five participants. To ensure the optimal privileging of the voice of the participants, the methods of data collection were further embedded in a larger context and culture of participation and ownership of the participants' social work practical work training at Bright Site. Each of these methods of data collection will be further elaborated upon and a description will be provided on how they were employed in this research endeavour:

Letter writing as method of data collection: Letter writing was used in phase one of the process of data collection. According to Epston (1994:31-39), letter writing gives "privilege [to] the clients' [or participants'] viewpoint in the official record". Rautio (2009:16 & 21) asserts that correspondence (which includes letter writing) is a valid and distinct method in researching subjective experiences. She asserts that the value of letter writing lies in the fact that the participants have control over the where and when of their responses and can further

⁷ The study included the whole population of 18 fourth level students who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site), in phases one (letter writing) and two (focus group discussion) of the process of data collection. However out of this population the number of participants actually involved in phases one and two of the data collection process totalled 11 respectively, as personal circumstances (i.e. illnesses, deaths in family etc) and social work practical work obligations prevented the total population to all be involved in both of the phases mentioned.

take their time in order to best explain, describe and formulate their thoughts, experiences and feelings. Meaning making and the articulation thereof are left in the hands of the participants and can be articulated and presented in an often much richer form than could be simulated in an interview: “thoughts put on paper can be read as, in a way, weightier for the participants than interview speech” (Rautio, 2009:22). In the first phase of data collection participants were requested to write a letter, as if for a loved one, and in lay-man’s terms to give account of their social work practical training experience at the Bright Site. Students were provided with a guideline comprising prompts and questions to assist them in this regard (see Addendum B: *A Guideline on how and what to focus on in compiling a letter to a love one explaining to them what your social work practical work training entailed*). These prompts and guiding questions had the same function as the ones contained in an interview guide in that they focused and guided the process of data collection by way of letter-writing in a focused but flexible manner (Fossey et al., 2002:727). Based on Oka and Shaw’s (2000) viewpoint that researchers should be clear about the decisions they make, the premise these decisions are based upon and be able to verify them, the researcher thought it necessary to provide (in brief) the rationale behind the questions formulated to facilitate a process of letter-writing (phase one of the data collection) in the ensuing discussion. The researcher will first state the question/prompt formulated and then provide the rationale.

Question 1: What is your understanding of a social work practical work placement and what did you do during your social work practical work placement at the Bright Site of Sunnyside?

Rationale:

The rationale for posing this question was born out of the researcher’s curiosity to explore the participants’ perceptions and understanding of what a “social work practical work placement” entails and what they did during their practical work placement at Bright Site.

Question 2: Indicate how your social work practical work placement compared with those of your friends at other organisations by reflecting this in a SWOT analysis.

Rationale:

Whilst the participants’ peer group was mostly placed at other non-governmental organisations or government organisations for their social work practical work training, the participants engaged in this study were placed at the Bright Site in Sunnyside which was initiated not as an alternative setting to the aforementioned “traditional social work practical work placement settings”, but rather an *along-side social work practical work field placement setting*.

In order to facilitate a critical but focused reflection and comparison, the researcher formulated this prompt to provide the participants with the opportunity to look at their social work practical work placement at the Bright Site in comparison with other placements and reflect on it by way of a SWOT analysis as espoused by Schenk et al. (2010:171) by focusing on the placement’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. (Not all the students

reflected on this question by means of comparison because not all knew other students who had done their 4th year social work practical work training at other organisations. These students merely did a SWOT analysis on their experience of doing their practical work at Bright Site. Those students who knew other students placed at other organisations for their practical work training could do the SWOT analysis by means of a comparison). The SWOT analysis as participatory rural action technique was well known to the participants and used by them previously in the course of their community work.

Question 3: What does “change” mean according to PCA?

Rationale:

The Person Centred Approach (PCA) underpins the curriculum for training student social workers at Unisa. Interventions at all levels and through all the primary methods of social work methods are funnelled through the PCA approach. With question three the researcher aimed to develop an understanding, from the participants' frame of reference and in their own words, of how they made sense of this approach in the context of their role as facilitators of change whether as case workers, group workers or community workers.

Question 4: How did you change this year and what stayed the same?

Rationale:

During informal discussions with participants, and continuous participatory evaluations (as described in paragraph 2.4.1 of this chapter) after training sessions, in the course of the year, the researcher in the role of lecturer often heard students say that the fourth year is at times life changing with very challenging demands. With this question, as well as questions seven and eight (which respectively probed into: *What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary? Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?*), in mind the researcher wanted to explore these statements in more depth as well as the availability of support or the lack thereof on a personal, academic and professional level.

Question 5: What did you learn about your community?

Rationale:

As background to and rationale for this question as well as questions six and nine stated further on below, the following: The Unisa Bright Site was developed in accordance with the “service- learning model” proposed by the CHE (Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008: 6). This model emphasises and clarifies service-learning as “applied learning directed at the needs of the community and integrated into an academic programme and curriculum” where the assumptions are that the goal is both learning and serving with the beneficiaries being both the learner and community (Bender et al., 2006:24). Students did their group and community work in various communities in and around Pretoria. For their case work, they were allocated individuals, children and/or families, from clients referred by other

organisations to Bright Site or clients who came to Bright Site by word of mouth. Clients were mostly clients living in the community in which the Bright Site is situated (Sunnyside and Pretoria central city). For community and group work services, communities were pre-identified via, amongst others, stakeholder meetings. Students were placed for group and community work in communities quite diverse and different from the communities in which they originated. They were, amongst others, exposed to different religions, cultures, languages and social-economic circumstances. An integral part of facilitating change from a PCA perspective is the role of the facilitator. The facilitator consciously attempts to assume a non-expert position with a willingness to learn from the community or group and to gain an in-depth understanding of the client's, community's and/or group's' frame of reference (Grobler et al., 2003:69-71). With the above questions the researcher wanted to explore the participants understanding of their role as facilitator, how and if they made sense of the service-learning model and how the participants as well as communities benefited, if at all, from this service-learning model.

Question 6: In what way did your community benefit from your involvement with them this year?

Rationale:

Refer to the rationale under question five as it applies to this question as well.

Question 7: What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary?

Rationale:

Refer to the rationale under question four as it partially applies to this question as well. Within the context of supervision, Van Dyk and Harrison (2008:1) refer to the role of the supervisor as to support, encourage, convey information relating to theory and practice knowledge, as well as building a constructive relationship with the supervisee. Given this context the researcher with this question wanted to explore the availability of support or lack thereof on a personal, academic and professional level in more depth.

Question 8: Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?

Rationale:

Refer to the rationale under question four as it applies to this question as well.

Question 9: Is it really necessary for students to be placed in communities? Please elaborate on your answer?

Rationale:

Refer to the rationale under question five as it applies to this question as well.

Question 10: What experiences gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice and what knowledge gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice?

Rationale:

With these two questions above and the answer to question eleven below the researcher wanted to gain an understanding into the relevance and meaning of the social work practical work training from the frames of reference of the participants.

Question 11: How will the experience and knowledge gained influence you in the future?

Rationale:

Refer to the rationale under question ten as it applies to this question as well.

The participants worked in groups of two or three and submitted electronic copies of their letters to the researcher. In accordance with the qualitative approach, which regards participants as experts regarding their own experiences forming an integral part of the study, the participants chose with whom they wanted to work in groups. The information shared through these letters (i.e. the themes deduced from the thematic content analysis of these letters) informed the “what” to be focused on (i.e. what to further explore and elaborate upon) in phases two and three of the data collection. To sum up: The themes that were derived from the analysis of the contents of the letters were explored in more depth and formed the basis for the interview guides of the focus group discussion as well as the face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

The initial letter writing (used during phase one for the purpose of data collection) was followed up by a focus group discussion as phase two of data collection with the aim to further explore and elaborate upon the generative themes that emerged from the letters.

The focus group discussion as method of data collection: According to Keegan (2009:74), the terms “focus group”, “group discussion” or “simply group” are used interchangeably with such a group typically consisting of six to ten individuals. The advantages inherent in focus group discussions as referred to by Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech and Zoran (2009:1) served as motivation for the researcher to employ this method of data collection customarily used in qualitative research projects for collecting data. Focus group discussions as method of data collection have some advantages in that these groups are cost-effective (i.e. in terms of time and manpower), create opportunities for a researcher to generate a variety of ideas from a variety of participants on a topic of interest, explore a phenomenon or an experience in a relaxed atmosphere where a sense of belonging to a group experienced by a participant may increase the cohesiveness amongst participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009:1). In this study a focus group discussion, with eleven participants out of a total of eighteen who met the criteria for inclusion above, was conducted. Various

unforeseen circumstances as previously discussed caused seven of the eighteen participants not to attend the focus group discussion.

Whilst it is customary in practice to conduct a focus group discussion with the group as a whole, the researcher departed from this tradition for the larger part of the focus group discussion by dividing the group of eleven participants into three smaller groups consisting of three but not more than four participants each. For the sake of greater clarity, these three smaller groups within the larger focus group were referred to as “brainstorming groups”. This decision to initially divide the focus group participants into smaller brainstorming groups was based on the following reasons: First, smaller group discussions were a well-known practice at the Bright Site as method to facilitate participatory learning. The participants were therefore used to working this way in most of their social work practical work workshops and training sessions and then to reconvene as a large group for giving feedback, for reflection and for further exploration and elaboration. Secondly, it gave each participant the choice to belong to a smaller group they felt more comfortable talking and sharing with. Finally more ideas are generated within such a small group discussion avoiding the domination of stronger voices and encouraging the more silent ones. The idea of forming smaller brainstorming groups was thus a simple pragmatic response to having to deal with larger numbers of students in workshops and training sessions but still ensure maximum participation of each student. Each brainstorming group had to identify a scribe who had the responsibility to write down the responses to the questions contained in the focus group discussion interview guide, provided to the participants to focus and guide the discussion. The questions included in the interview guide for the focus group discussion were to a large extent based on the words used and themes derived from the letters the participants wrote about their social work practical work experience in the first phase of the data collection. However the researcher also introduced new topics for exploration aimed at facilitating a richer description of the participants’ social work practical work training experiences. The aim of these questions in the interview guide of the focus group discussion was to facilitate further exploration and elaboration of the identified themes (from the participants’ frames of reference) that emerged as result of the thematic analysis of the letter-writing activity, as phase one of the data collection. In this focus group discussion the researcher thus extended the “conversation” as it had emerged from the letters. The following questions were formulated in view of focusing and guiding the brainstorming activity within smaller groups in the focus group. (These questions were once again used to guide the feedback session where the participants [i.e. the different brainstorming groups] had to report back to the focus groups and the responses were verified, clarified, further explored and elaborated upon.)

The following questions were used as a guide for the focus group discussion:

Question 1: From your letters the theme of “change” emerged in that most of you mentioned that you have changed a lot.

- How do you think this year changed the way you think about yourself and your relationships with others?
- What have you discovered about yourself this year that you have not been aware of before?

Question 2⁸: Although this theme did not emerge from your letters I was wondering if you had to be in charge of the training of social workers at Unisa - referring to your own learning experience - what would you emphasise in this training, how will you do it, what will you change or do differently? (Refer to the content of study guides, PCA theory, social work practical work etc.)

Question 3: From the information shared with your loved ones in your letters, the theme of (various) challenges you had to face this year emerged (i.e. financial challenges, lack of safety issues, fear, insecurity and a high work load to mention a few)

- Based on your experiences in this regard, how will you guide new students on how to cope with such challenges? (Please try to be specific in your answers)
- Emerging from your letters and looking at financial issues; what expenses were you not prepared for this year (identify and link them to costs) and how can you/new students overcome this?

Question 4: From the accounts contained in your letters, the theme of “sacrifice” emerged in that in the past year you had to sacrifice a lot (i.e. time with the people you love, financial costs, and your social life, to mention a few). If you knew then what you know now would you make the same sacrifices?

- If you answered “yes”, elaborate on what made these sacrifices worthwhile for you?
- If you answered “no”, explain your answer and inform me what you would have done differently.

Question 5: Being concerned about your safety came to the fore as another theme, especially when entering the field to do your social work practical work (i.e. many of you entered into and had to work in volatile dangerous communities and were scared, but also managed to keep yourself safe.)

⁸ Note that this question did not emerge as a result of information derived from the letters written by the participants but was formulated by the researcher to be discussed during the focus group discussion.

- From your experiences gained in this regard what advice would you forward to future students to keep themselves safe? Or to put it differently, what do they need to know and do to keep themselves safe?

Question 6: Although this did not emerge as a theme from your letters, but in trying to look at Bright Site in relation to other universities and comparing yourself with other students from other universities -

- What do you think made your training and training in the distance environment different?
- In retrospect would you still choose the Unisa context, and motivate?

Question 7: Your letters reflected a very positive picture of the social work practical work placement and I was wondering if there is anything that could be done differently like for example: if you could attend a bridging course before final entrance into social work practice what would you include in such a programme? Motivate your answer.

Question 8: Although not reflected in your letters, report writing skills of students are a grave concern for supervisors and lecturers. Your input serves as learning experience for Bright Site and directly affects the training programme of future students; I therefore wondered:

- How and when would you suggest we help students to develop their writing skills?
- What can students do to enhance their own report writing?

Whilst the interview guide for the focus group discussion contained eight questions (with some of the questions further divided into sub-questions) this interview guide was exactly as the name says "a guide" in that the researcher invited the participants (as experts on the research topic) to decide which questions they thought they would like to explore further in that they had not been sufficiently addressed in their letters. In exercising their right to choose, the participants decided to exclude questions one, four and eight, as they felt that questions one and four were extensively covered in the letters they had compiled, while question eight was not directly related to the topic of the research and rather part of the researcher's agenda. Subsequently, all the brainstorming groups explored questions two, three, five, six, and seven. The small brainstorming groups then gave feedback to the bigger focus group where ideas were further exchanged, elaborated upon and clarified. On completion of the focus group discussion the scribes in each of the brainstorming groups provided the researcher with their original notes reflecting on each question they explored. These notes, together with the notes taken by the researcher during the feedback stage of the focus group discussion were thematically analysed by the researcher.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews as method of data collection: A sample of five students was selected for the third phase of data collection. One participant volunteered to

take part in the third phase and four were purposively approached by the researcher to take part in the individual interviews. The participants purposively approached by the researcher were selected on the basis of their ability to critically reflect on their practical training. These participants' ability for critical reflection was noticed and they demonstrated it during the course of their practical training (i.e. they have and displayed the ability and confidence to honestly verbalise their thoughts and feelings and could reflect on *the impact* or *effects* of actions, ways of doing, and/or training practices). All the participants in phase three of the data collection had to take part in phases one and two of this study. During this phase of data collection (phase three) face-to-face- semi-structured interviews were used as method of data collection. Nieuwenhuis (in Maree, 2007:87) defines an interview "as a two-way conversation guided by the researcher asking questions, relevant to the study, to a participant". For Fossey et al. (2002 727) "qualitative research interviews aim to elicit participants' view of their lives, as portrayed in their stories and in so doing gaining access to their experiences, feelings and social world". A qualitative interview thus gives rise to the opportunity to explore how participants themselves define and describe experiences related to the study with the added advantages of flexibility, and the opportunity to follow up new dimensions as they arise during the interview (Murphy & Dingwall 2003, 82- 85). A semi-structured interview requires the participant to respond to a set of predetermined questions, but the researcher could still explore new themes as they emerge (Nieuwenhuis in Maree, 2007:87). The selected participants were prepared verbally for the interview by the researcher as a group, followed up by a letter confirming the discussion. This letter also served as an interview guide which was provided to the participants at least a week before the scheduled interviews explaining:

- The purpose of the interview.
- How they as participants could prepare for the interview
- What they could expect in the interview.
- Inviting the participants to co-construct the interview by determining their own agenda and contents of the interview.

An example of this letter is provided below:

AN INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH PROMPTS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE FACE-TO-FACE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Dear Student

Our discussion regarding the context of the interview refers. I would like to express my appreciation for your willingness to participate in the interview.

Context of the Interview

The purpose of this interview is to further extend the conversation and to reflect on your personal and unique experiences of doing social work practical work at Bright Site. The information and insights shared by you will assist the Bright Site's Management team and the Department of Social Work at Unisa to assess the social work practical work training and service-learning provided at this Centre and this in turn will inform the social work practical training of future students.

Preparation for the interview

In preparation for the interview I would like you to:

- *Think of anything (for example a picture/ metaphor/ song/ poem/ drama/ story) that you think will express or best describe your experience of doing practical work at Bright Site.*
- *Prepare two or more questions that you would like to be asked during this face-to-face interview regarding your practical placement at Bright Site.⁹*

Your interview will thus be unique and the content will largely depend on what you would like to bring to the table.

I was also thinking about a few things that could be used as an interview guide to focus and guide our discussion. It is your prerogative to consider these questions in your preparation for the interview or focus on any other issues relating to your practical experience at Bright Site.

In reflecting on your learning experience:

- *What do you regard as the most significant experience during your practical work at Bright Site?*
- *What do you regard as the most insignificant experience during your practical work at Bright Site?*
- *What does a student need to have in order to "survive" a practical placement at the Site?*
- *If you could choose three people who observed the impact of the practical placement on you personally and professionally what do you think each of them would say about what they saw happening in you this year?*
- *Complete the sentence: "When I started my practical work at Bright Site I believed that....six months later I believed that.... by the end of my first year I believed...."*

⁹ These two questions aimed to allow the students to co-construct the interview questions according to language and metaphors they felt comfortable with. As result participants brought the following questions to the face-to-face semi-structured interview as areas they preferred to explore: how do students cope? What support is available to students? What opportunities are available at a Bright Site placement? What changes occurred in me as result of doing social work practical work at Bright Site? What was important about my practical work experience? What is working really well in the Bright Site placement? What could be done in order to enable students to cope better? These questions were explored with the participants and emerged into (and are incorporated) into six themes as presented in the next chapter

Should you be the practical coordinator responsible for the fourth-year practical training of student social workers at the Bright Site?

- *What selection criteria (type of student that will best fit with the Bright Site) will you use to place students at the Bright Site?*
- *How will you go about addressing the typical stumbling blocks experienced by students doing their practical work at Bright Site?*
- *What aspects of the practical placement will you keep the same?¹⁰*

I am looking forward to our discussion

Kind regards

Cuzette du Plessis

All the above data collection methods were facilitated by specific communication and interviewing skills (to be discussed below) aimed at inviting and encouraging participants to give a richer and in-depth account of their real life experiences, feelings and thoughts regarding their practical work training within the milieu of Bright Site as the relevant Service-learning Centre.

2.4.3 COMMUNICATION AND INTERVIEWING SKILLS USED DURING THE PROCESSES OF DATA COLLECTION

The researcher used a range of communication and interviewing skills in order to foster an enabling environment for participants to relate their experiences during their social work practical work training. In accordance with the Person Centred Approach the researcher's focal point was to *get into the shoes* of the participants, in order to understand and see the world as experienced through *their eyes and frame of reference* (Grobler et al., 2003:68-74). With the aim of the study being to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences relating to their social work practical work training, the researcher endeavoured to formulate "how" and "what" types of questions in order to come to an in-depth understanding of their experiences. With this in mind the researcher used communication and interviewing skills which, like building blocks; build onto one another in order to create an environment that unlocked such an in-depth discussion and critical reflection. These skills were embedded in and informed by both the Person Centred and Narrative approaches (cf. Freedman and Combs, 1996:97-98., Schenck et al., 2010:119, & Grobler et al., 2003:128-129, 152-153).

¹⁰ The questions in the interview guide aimed to explore, not just the experiences, but also the meanings the participants attached to the experiences of their social work practical work training. The questions also aimed to further elaborate on the storylines and themes as emerged from the letter writing and focus group discussion as methods of data collection (data collection phases one and two of the study).

A narrative way of viewing the world, relevant to this study, in summary assumes the following: people make sense of and ascribe meaning to their life experiences over a period of time in the form of stories. The meanings we ascribe, in co-construction with the people and institutions around us, eventually script the plot of our life story, with some plots more dominant than others (cf. Freedman & Combs, 1996 and Morgan, 2000). For example a dominating plot might be “Samantha is incompetent” supported by experiences of failure in an examination, two divorces, and a car accident. However other marginalised stories co-exist with the dominant plot, without meanings ever attached to it. In Samantha’s case it could be (to mention just a few) her love for music or a deep care for animals. Meanings that could have been attached to these experiences can be for example that Samantha is a deeply caring or a sensitive person. All actions and decisions people make are informed by and impact on the dominant meanings they attach to certain aspects of themselves. The researcher’s adoption of this narrative way of viewing the world and the narrative way of interviewing to come to understand the world was for the purpose of this research endeavour embraced intentionally. Adopting this approach enabled the researcher to facilitate opportunities for the participants to unlock and voice their marginalised stories, or those stories that contradict the dominant often problem-saturated stories of the participants (cf. Freedman & Combs, 1996 and Morgan, 2000). Kotzé and Kotzé (2001:37) quoted White saying “narrative therapy assists people to break from the identity claims that are associated with the problem-saturated accounts of their lives”. These new meanings attached to voiceless stories evoke a new way of looking at and responding to the world and people around us. Although the focus of the study was not therapeutic change, the Person Centred and narrative approaches strongly informed the interviewing process in that the same skills used in these approaches for exploring and unlocking the voice of those untold stories (from the frames of reference of the participants) were used during the process of data collection in order to get a richer more in-depth description of the phenomenon under study. The skills that were used were the following:

- **Deconstructive listening**

Deconstructive listening formed the foundational building block on which the researcher used other communication and interviewing skills in order to explore a richer more comprehensive description of the participants’ experiences as they related specifically to their social work practical work. Deconstructive listening is a way of listening to and unpacking a story within a broader cultural context of beliefs, practices and ideas (Morgan, 2000:45). For Freedman and Combs (1996:46) deconstructive listening entails an understanding and acceptance of people’s stories “without reifying or intensifying the powerlessness, painful and pathological aspects of those stories... (a listening that would)...open space for aspects of people’s life narratives that haven’t yet been storied”. Deconstructive listening enabled the researcher to wonder about and eventually explore what the participants *did not say* to the researcher.

Morgan (2000:55) will refer to this line of inquiry as an inquiry into, or **questions about the unique outcomes of a story**, thus what has not been said, and what storylines resist the dominant and sometimes problem- saturated storylines of people's lives. For White (1997:225) this line of inquiry would open up a point of entry to explore other ways of being and thinking in the world as well as other ways of knowledge of life and/or responding to the world. Based on the stories from the participants' letters, the researcher identified themes like the difficulty and demands of student life within an ODL context, students being exposed to crime and volatile situations in communities during the course of their social work practical work, students with various roles and responsibilities (i.e. those of being student, breadwinner, spouse and partner) and having to make sacrifices at different levels in order to meet the demands and requirements of the social work practical work training. In exploring the silent, voiceless issues or issues students did not say, the researcher asked for example: *how did they manage to keep themselves safe, how did students cope with the demands of student work and family life, who supports them in their endeavours, what makes the sacrifice worth the while, what skills do they need to have in order to "survive" a Bright Site placement etc?* This line of questioning is partially similar to what Schenck et al. (2010:119) would call **appreciative enquiry questions** which focus on people's knowledge, skills, and abilities. Answers to these questions open up the space for the *retelling* of the same story, but exploring marginalised experiences, practices and meanings attached to it, all still situated in the real life experience of the participant and from the participants' own frame of reference.

- **Landscape of action and landscape of identity questions**

In order to evoke detailed and comprehensive discussions the researcher used what Freedman and Combs (1996:97-98) refer to as "**landscape of action**" and "**landscape of identity**" questions. Although the above authors use these questions in a therapeutic context, the researcher found these questions helpful for the purposes of this study in order to explore, not just the experiences, but also the meanings the participants attached to the experiences related to their social work practical work and training at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL context. Freedman and Combs (1996:97-98) state that landscape of action questions are the "who", "what", "when", "where" and "how" types of questions that facilitate the exploration of the experience, the effect of problems, as well as the community's influence on the problems (the latter in the context of this study referring to the Bright Site and Unisa). Therefore, and in order to partially explore the context based impact, of ODL and doing social work practical work and training at a "non-traditional" social work practical work setting, the researcher, for example asked the following landscape of action questions: *In comparing yourself with peers from other universities, what do you think made your training and training in the distance environment different?.. What do you regard as the most significant experience during your social work practical work at Bright Site? What do you regard as the most insignificant experience during your social work practical work training at*

Bright Site? From your experiences gained in this regard what advice would you forward to future students to keep themselves safe? Or to put it differently, what do they need to know and do to keep themselves safe?

Landscape of identity or meaning questions “reflect on the implications of experienced stories in the landscape of action” (Freedman & Combs, 1996:97-98). During this process the beliefs, commitments, intentions and desires related to the experience are being explored. Thus, based on the information about how the participants change through the year, the researcher further explored the desires and commitments underpinning this change by asking for example that the participants *complete the following sentences*:

- *“When I started my social work practical work at Bright Site I believed that....*
- *Six months later I believed that....*
- *By the end of my first year I believed....*

In another example the researcher asked the following questions:

- *If you could choose three people who observed the impact of the practical placement on you personally and professionally what do you think each of them would say about what they saw happening in you this year?*
- *How do you think did this year change the way you think about yourself and your relationships with others?*

Complementary to and integrated within the aforementioned communication and interviewing skills the researcher also used the following basic skills of attentiveness, probing and empathy to lubricate the flow of conversation during the focus group discussion and the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In short these skills can be described as follows:

- **Attentiveness**

Attentiveness, according to Grobler et al. (2003:128-129), would create a physical and psychological context where the participants feel safe enough to explore and share their stories in depth. Attentiveness refers to how the researcher facilitates this context which includes arrangements in the physical setting but also the emotional setting of the interview process. With reference to the physical setting the researcher gave attention to the privacy of the interview room, making sure that there were no distractions whilst having the focus group discussion and face-to-face semi-structured interviews, ensuring informal seating arrangements with no tables between the researcher and participants and the use of a tape recorder in order for the researcher to give undivided attention to the participants. Emotionally a context conducive to the freedom of expression was created by giving attention to the verbal as well as non-verbal messages of the participant; by making sure that the researcher

was well orientated towards the participant and emotionally not distracted during the interview, by making eye contact and listening with interest to the participant.

- **Probing**

Three types of probing strategies as suggested by Nieuwenhuis (in Maree, 2007:89) were used, namely: detailed-orientated probes, elaboration probes and clarification probes. With the detailed-orientated probes the researcher delved into the “who”, “where” and “what” of the participant’s stories for example the researcher asked: *Who did what, and how, to support you, personally, professionally and academically?* The elaboration probes aimed to get a fuller understanding of what the participant said and usually entailed that the researcher asked the participant to tell more about what have been said (i.e. can you elaborate on what you have just said...). The clarification probes helped the researcher to clarify the meanings the participants attached to their stories from their perspective. The researcher, for example asked the following questions: *What would the students say will help them to cope better with their practical work at Bright Site? What gives a person the ability to contribute? What was the impact on you? Who do you think suffers the most in such a group? What makes it so great for you?*

- **Empathy**

For Egan as cited by Grobler et al. (2003:152-153) empathy refers to a “form of communication (which) involves both listening to and understanding the client”. In this process the researcher communicated to the participant both what was heard on a content level but also what the researcher heard the participant said or implied about her/himself as a person in that message. This is a tentative process which was mostly followed up by one of the above mentioned probing strategies. As example the researcher used empathy the following way: *Your fourth-year practical work at Bright Site demanded a lot of you in your life as a mother, as a student, as a friend, as a daughter, as a sister. If I listen to you Susan (pseudonym), you sacrificed a lot ... and lost some because of the time it took to do your practical placement, am I correct? It's still difficult for you?*

In conclusion the researcher used the above communication skills in order to understand the participants' practical experience from their frame of reference, but to also evoke a deeper richer understanding of these experiences. Following the data collection the data had to be analysed and how it panned out in this endeavour will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

2.5 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

In view of the qualitative research approach adopted for this research project, the approach to data analysis in this study was based on certain qualitative traditions. Qualitative data analysis is, as suggested by Creswell (2009:175), inductive in nature where the researcher's point of departure was to generate themes as it emerged from the data collected (cf. Barroso, 2010:117). Creswell (2009:183) refers to data analysis as a process of "meaning making" related to the data collected which is an on-going process of analytical reflection of the assembled data. Just like stories, without meanings attached to them, could be described as merely skeletons without substance, so too can research data be referred to without meanings ascribed to the data.

Common to qualitative research there is a continuous overlap between data collection and data analysis. Mäkelä and Turcan (2007:137) refer to this on-going process of data analysis whilst being engaged in data collection as "controlled opportunism" where researchers take advantage of the uniqueness of new emerging data to refocus the study.

Data analysis was however also an on-going process that occurred throughout the study, with the participants being invited to further clarify and confirm the themes derived from the data collected. Themes derived from data analysis of the letters written by the participants (phase one of the data collection) were confirmed and further explored through the focus group discussion (phase two of the data collection). The face-to-face semi-structured interviews (conducted as phase three of the data collection) confirmed, clarified, and further explored the themes derived from the data collected in the first two phases. Finally the researcher provided the transcripts of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews to each of the participants who took part in phase three of data collection. The participants each read back the contents of their respective interviews, made corrections, added further information where they felt it was necessary, clarified the meaning of the stories where needed and finally highlighted what they regarded as the most important themes to be reflected upon in the report. This relates to member-checking which will be discussed under the section on methods of data verification further in the study.

The researcher acknowledges the complexity and dynamics of any system, so too with reference to this study. The social work practical work training and experience (of fourth -year student social workers at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL university) could be regarded as context specific and with a dynamic interplay of various factors inherent in this context. The study therefore did not set itself out to generalise or prove or disprove any causal relationships, but merely to explore and describe the experiences (and perspectives implied in this experiences) of the participants.

The value of the data analysis engendered by this study was to cultivate an in-depth understanding of the participants' social work practical work training as experienced from their frame of reference. This was achieved by the researcher in departing from the Narrative and Person Centred approaches as she searched for meanings attached to data obtained from the perspective of the participants, but also confirmed by them. Stoecker (2005:19) comments on the usefulness of participants being integrally involved in the data analysis stage. They could ultimately clarify, and add on to the interpretations of the analysis.

To assist with analysing the data collected through the letters written by the participants, the focus group discussion and the face-to-face semi-structured interviews **the researcher followed the eight steps for analysing data qualitatively generated as proposed by Tesch** (in Creswell, 2009:186).

Since the researcher had the letters and the notes of the focus group discussion, she first had to transcribe the audio recordings of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews before she could commence with **the first step** of the process of data collection which entailed that of reading through all the transcripts to get a sense of the whole.

As **second step**, the researcher took the letters written by the participants and the transcriptions of the interviews as she considered these to be the most comprehensive with rich data descriptions and read through them. While reading she looked for the meanings covered in the data and wrote them down.

For the **third step** she re-read the letters compiled by the participants, the transcriptions of the interviews and the notes compiled on the focus group discussion and made a list of all the topics that emerged from the data. From this activity the following topics were initially derived. Students' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a Social Work practical work placement setting, students' experiences related to their practical work in communities, students' reflections on their experiences related to supervision, challenges experienced by students during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site, support experienced by students while engaging in their social work practical work training, and students' suggestions about Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting and advice to prospective future students.

During **step four** of the data analysis she formed a code for each of the aforementioned topics, for example: Students' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a Social Work practical work placement setting was coded as "*Placemuexp*".

With this list of coded topics she returned to the data set and as **step five** she wrote the correct code next to each segment of data corresponding to a particular topic.

During **step six** the researcher tried to find the most descriptive wording for the topics identified at the third step above and turned them into themes. (Most of the wording of topics was kept as is and adopted as themes.)

During **step seven** the codes and the corresponding topics turned into themes were then organised in alphabetical order to ease the last step to perform in the process of qualitative data analysis.

By using the “cut and paste” facility on the computer all the data tagged with a similar code were cut and then pasted under a theme related to the code (as **step eight**). The researcher then proceeded with a preliminary analysis and subsequently integrated themes to provide for a more cohesive data set.

In the next section the method followed for data verification will be discussed.

2.6 METHODS OF DATA VERIFICATION

In affirmation of the “accuracy or truthfulness” of the study the researcher used various data verification strategies. Qualitative validity means that the researcher affirms the accuracy and truth-value of the findings, with accuracy and truth being understood in the context of this study as data and accompanied meanings witnessing with, and being confirmed by the participants (Gibbs cited by Creswell, 2009:190). Whittaker (2002:252) refers to the credibility or truth-value of the study where the researcher records faithful descriptions and interpretations of data which need to be recognisable by the participants with trustworthiness being enhanced by member checking back to the participants. **Participant validation** was thus useful as a method to verify these descriptions and interpretations of data. The data collected during the three phases of data collection were taken back to the participants for validation (Silverman, 2004:233). The data of each consecutive phase as described above were thus not just explored in the next phase but also clarified and confirmed. The researcher further had a clear audit trail by means of letters, notes and transcribed interviews.

In this study there was a close relationship (and as discussed on various levels) between the researcher and the participants. It could be argued that this relationship brought with it biases which affected the reliability of the study. Nicholls (2009:590) however argues “In qualitative research...personal bias is acknowledged as an inevitable feature of our humanity, and one that is vital if we are to explore the feelings, meanings and personal contexts of our participants’ lived experiences”. In cognisance of the researcher’s biases, common in qualitative research, the researcher continuously attempted to overtly expose the biases, suppositions and presuppositions brought into the study. Streubert Speziale and Carpenter (2007:343) refer to this as **reflexive validity**. In illustration of this practice the researcher for

example overtly acknowledged the fact, in conversations with the participants, that she had not just the role of researcher but also of manager and of lecturer at the Bright Site. The researcher notified the participants that everything that would be done at the Bright Site could be used for research purposes (not just by the researcher but also other academics at the Department of Social Work or other Departments at Unisa). Participants were always informed of and had to give their informed consent for any such study. Thus although the researcher wanted to get an in-depth understanding of the fourth-year student social workers' social work practical work experience at the Bright Site the researcher, as manager of the Site, also had an interest in, and obligation to ensure the effectiveness of service delivery, not just to the community but also to the students (also participants in the study). The researcher, but also in the role of manager, therefore made this explicit in conversations with the participants and tried to dovetail these two roles with continuous action-reflection-planning as participatory mode of evaluation. This created a context where honest reflection was part of a culture at Bright Site which was part of their day-to-day practice. Participants were thus as far as possible invited to reflect and plan *with* the Bright Site team. This practice seems to be recognised and acknowledged by the participants as was evident in one of the sub-themes derived from the data analysis. (Refer to Chapter 3: Sub-theme 1.6, where a sub-theme emerged regarding the participants' experience related to the application of the Person Centered Approach as theoretical point of departure for their practical work social work service delivery at the Bright Site.)

As mentioned in Chapter One the researcher also used the following strategies as recommended by Creswell (2009:191-193) to enhance the researcher's and the readers' ability to access the accuracy of findings:

- **Triangulation of data sources:** The researcher obtained several perspectives, over a period of time, with different data collection methods in an attempt to verify the information (Yegidis & Weinbach 1996:218). Relevant to this study, data were collected by means of five letters from eleven participants, one focus group interview with eleven participants, and five in- depth face-to-face interviews.
- In addition to and similar to participant validation, Creswell (2009:191) talks about **member checking** as a means to further verify data. In this study the researcher took the transcripts of the face-to-face interviews back to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the contents and the meanings attached. A copy of the research findings was also presented as a hard copy to the participants in order to confirm the meanings and interpretation in the report.
- **Peer examination:** the opinions of colleagues and co-workers were sought (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:38). The researcher obtained feedback from the Department of Social Work's Research and Ethics Committee, as well as colleagues and co-workers who are well-versed in qualitative research. The researchers' study leader is also an expert in

qualitative research, mentoring various doctoral and masters' studies and serving as principal coordinator of all research done in the Department of Social Work at Unisa.

- **Crystallisation** as practice of validating the results was used where the researcher considered *other* conflicting interpretations and/or conclusions regarding information collected and analysed (Maree and Van der Westhuizen 2007:40-41). For Creswell (2009:192) the presentation of discrepancies in data collection adds to the validity and credibility of the account and makes it more real and realistic. In presenting the themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories the researcher for instance highlighted the contradictions in stories about the contact person as well as the peer group experience where both were experienced as supportive but also with ambiguities presented in those relationships. (Refer further to Chapter 3: Sub-category 1.3.7.2 and Category 5.2.2 relating to experiences with the contact person at the Bright Site as well as Sub-theme 4.3. and Category 5.2.4 relating to working in groups and peer group support.)
- As Creswell (2009:192) suggested, the researcher **spend prolonged time in the field** in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the practical training experience of the fourth-year social work students placed at a Service-learning Centre at an ODL university. The researcher worked with the participants, for a period of nine months, at the Bright Site which was the actual setting where they did their social work practical work.
- Reflecting on the **authority of the researcher**, the researcher attended workshops on qualitative research with a view to marking research plan grids, draft research reports and final fourth-year research reports, including co-presentation/facilitation of qualitative research methodology workshops for fourth level student social workers for Module SCK410-B. The researcher also conducted research for oral presentations at ASSASWEI in 2009 and 2010. In qualifying for the BA (SS) NDP at Unisa (1995) a qualitative research project was undertaken entitled *Teenage sexuality in respect of attitudes and values*.

During the course of the study the researcher was conscious of the fact that the participatory nature of this research (with participants being the primary source for data collection, analysis and verification), could evoke a sense of awareness amongst participants of how the study and their being part of it impacted on them. The participants as actively involved in the study could thus not escape being influenced or impacted by the study. This raised various ethical issues that had to be considered before the onset and during the course of the study.

2.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Qualitative research as a dynamic and participant-orientated process also brings with it a sense of unpredictability. The ethical considerations for qualitative research should therefore be cultivated from an understanding that "research is dynamic and that the process, by its application, may result in unanticipated ethical concerns" (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter

2007:62). In recapping Chapter One the ethical considerations pertaining to this study were thus as follows:

- By **informing** the individuals about what the research project entailed before they **consented** to participation, the researcher enabled the potential participants to make a decision on whether or not to participate in the study (Silverman, 2004:271). Using Silverman as guideline for the application of informed consent in this study; the researcher gave the potential participants the relevant information in order to enable them to make an informed decision on whether or not to participate. The researcher made sure that the prospective participants understood the information by conversing in English (English is also the language medium of teaching at Unisa) and ensuring that participants understood the relevant concepts. Participation was voluntary and confirmed by means of written consent (see Addendum A: Ethical consent form).
- **Confidentiality and anonymity** in qualitative studies poses some challenges. Rich in-depth descriptions, focus group discussions, face-to-face interviews and the natural setting in itself make identification of participants inevitable (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter, 2007:66). Keeping these challenges in mind, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were addressed by using pseudonyms for all forms of data collected. Although during the focus group discussion, participants could identify each other, each participant gave their consent at the onset of the study, and could have withdrawn from the process if they so wished, or asked for any information provided to be omitted from records. Participants were further informed that the findings would be reported in the form of a dissertation and raw data would be presented in such a way that the identity of the participants could not be identified.
- **Management of information** in this study was vital in preserving confidentiality. Audiotapes used were coded in order to disguise any identifying information. The research supervisor(s)/promoter(s), and the independent coder could not identify the participants as all transcriptions were coded by using pseudonyms or a numbering system. Upon the completion of the study the audiotapes and the transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed. All participants had the right to change their mind at any time during the study and to withdraw consent and discontinue participation.
- **Avoid harm or distress:** Monette et al. (2008:61) point to the fact that research should **avoid harm to or distress** of the participants. Although no harm or distress could be foreseen in this study, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that the interviews might touch on sensitive issues unique to the participant. After one interview the information shared left the participant feeling emotionally upset. The

researcher spent time after the interview debriefing the participant. No further counselling was needed.

Acknowledging that this study, in ways that could not have been foreseen, could impact on the participants themselves as well as their professional and personal development, the researcher used Kotze's (2002:27) idea of "ethicising" where the researcher negotiated *with* those affected by the study. The researcher continuously negotiated, via the small group discussions, and before or during interviews, suitable ways with the participants on how to do the study and what the impact of it was or could be on them.

2.8 SUMMARY

This chapter has offered a description of the application of the qualitative research process in order to investigate the experiences of the fourth level student social workers about the social work practical work and training at a Service-learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning University. The approach for this study was qualitative in nature as it afforded the researcher the opportunity of gaining an in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. An explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry was employed within the qualitative research approach. This chapter further covered the research population, sampling and sampling techniques used in this study. In view of the fact that the population comprised only 18 individuals, a total of 18 participants were included in phases one and two of the data collection¹¹. The researcher used purposive sampling as method in order to select a sample of participants for the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The chapter clarified the three phases used in this study in order to collect the data, namely letter writing by eleven participants resulting in five group letters, one focus group interview and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a sample of five participants. The application of the principle of data saturation in this study was explained.

The discussion related to data collection and field work strategies included how the researcher prepared for data collection, the methods used for data collection, as well as the skills used for data collection. The chapter then proceeded to the strategies for data analysis and verification which included a discussion on data analysis strategies and methods of data verification. The chapter finally concluded by clarifying the application of the ethical considerations in this study.

¹¹ The study included the whole population of 18 fourth level students who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site, in phases one (letter writing) and two (focus group discussion) of the process of data collection. However out of this population the number of participants involved in phases one and two of the data collection process totalled 11 respectively, as personal circumstances (i.e. illnesses, deaths in family etc) and social work practical work obligations prevented the total population from all being involved in both of the mentioned phases.

The following chapter will present research findings and the literature control. This will be done in the form of themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories that emerged from the data analysis process.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS COMPLEMENTED BY A LITERATURE CONTROL ON FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE- LEARNING CENTRE OF AN ODL UNIVERSITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The following research question was formulated at the outset of this study to focus the research endeavour: *What are the experiences of fourth level student social workers, at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre?* In an effort to answer this research question, the aim or the purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL university. To aid the process of answering the research question and realising the aforementioned goal, the researcher employed a qualitative research approach and drew upon an explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry. Data were collected through letter writing, a focus group discussion and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of five participants. The themes derived from the analysis of the content of the letters were explored in more depth and formed the basis for the interview-guides of the focus group discussion as well as the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using Tesch's eight steps (in Creswell 2009:186) of data analysis. Data presented in this chapter were further validated through the use of an independent coder who analysed the data independently of the researcher. (The use of an independent coder resonates with Creswell's (2009:192) reference to an external auditor as method to enhance the overall validity of the qualitative generated data.) Upon completion of the independent processes of data analysis by the researcher and the independent coder, the researcher and independent coder engaged in a consensus discussion facilitated by the study's supervisor. This discussion compared and consolidated the themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories which emerged from the data-analysis processes.

The findings of this study will be presented according to themes, sub-themes, categories as well as sub-categories (where applicable) and will be supported by direct quotations or storylines from the transcribed interviews. In affirmation of this way of presenting findings Neuman (2006:181) states that it is common in qualitative studies for data to be presented in the form of the written or spoken words of the participants. Davidson et al. are cited by Fossey et al. (2002:723) who comment that in a qualitative phenomenological research report

“quotes from interviews with participants are interspersed throughout the textual description to clearly illustrate the themes described”.

In order to place these findings within a context of what is already known or not about the findings the researcher will conduct a literature review enabling her to do a literature control. For Streubert Speziale and Carpenter (2007:26) the purpose of a literature review in qualitative studies is to place the findings in a context of what is already known about the phenomenon. A literature review can also be seen as one way of establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of a study. Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:218) refer to triangulation as a way to verify the information, whereas the researcher will obtain several perspectives by collecting data from different sources. Relevant to this study, the triangulation of data sources was not only employed by means of incorporating various data collection methods but also by using various literature sources in triangulation to underscore and verify the identified themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories.

In this chapter the researcher will first present the demographic data of the participants (i.e. fourth-year student social workers who did their social work practical training at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL University). In addressing the issues of confidentiality, pseudonyms and/or participant numbering (i.e. participant one, two, three etc.) were used for all participants (Streubert Speziale and Carpenter, 2007:66). Following the presentation of the demographic data of the participants, the themes, sub-themes, categories and where applicable the sub-categories that emerged from the processes of data collection and analysis will be presented, underscored and illuminated by storylines from the dataset and be subjected to a literature control.

3.2 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

In this section, the demographic data will be presented of fourth-year student social workers who did their social work practical training at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL University, and who participated in the study.

Taking into account the contextual backdrop to this study the researcher will shortly revisit the notion of “open and distance learning” as well as “service-learning”. Bourn and Bootle (2005:344) unpack open and distance learning as learning that aims to meet the prerequisites of the individual student but also to facilitate access to learning for disadvantaged groups. Distance learning is a subset of open learning, where teacher and learner are in separate locations and where teaching encompasses a more formal style. Open and distance learning is characterised as being student centred where learners have an increased autonomy, choice, control and flexibility in their learning process, they choose what, when, where and how they learn. Smith (2010:228) is of the view that the concepts “open learning”, “distance

learning”, and “open and distance learning”, refer to all the strategies designed to enable wider participation in education, at whatever level.

Service-learning can loosely be defined as a context where students simultaneously devote their time to a service related activity in a community or organisation whilst being enrolled in a related college level course (Score, 2010:76). Within the context of this study the Bright Site was developed in accordance with the service-learning model proposed by the Council for Higher Education [CHE] (Department of Social Work - Unisa, 2008:6). This model of service-learning places emphasis on service-learning as “applied learning directed at the needs of the community and integrated into an academic programme and curriculum” (Bender et al., 2006:24).

The following section will proceed with the presentation of the demographic data of the participants in a table form, with a subsequent discussion of the demographic data.

3.2.1 THE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE PARTICIPANTS

As discussed in the previous chapter the researcher decided to include the whole population (i.e. all the fourth level social work students who were placed at Bright Site for their social work practical work training) in phases one and two of the data collection since the population totalled only 18 ¹²students/participants. From this population five participants were purposively selected for phase three of the data collection process (face-to-face semi-structured interviews).

The demographic data of the fourth-year student social workers (also participants) who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site are portrayed by focusing on the following: their ages at the time of conducting the study, their gender, race, marital status, the number of dependants of the participants, their occupational status, the means of financial assistance for their studies, and their place of residence at the time of conducting the study.

Table 3.1 below provides a summary of the demographic data of the participants (all fourth-year student social workers who did their social work practical training at Bright Site).

¹² The study included the whole population of 18 fourth level students who did their social work practical work training at the Bright Site), in phases one (letter writing) and two (focus group discussion) of the process of data collection. However out of this population the number of participants actually involved in phases one and two of the data collection process totalled 11, as personal circumstances (i.e. illnesses, deaths in family etc) and social work practical work obligations prevented the total population from all being involved in both of the mentioned phases.

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Race	Marital status	Number and Age of dependants	Occupational status	Financial assistance for studies	Place of residence during studies
1	38	F	Black	Married	2, both 11 years (twins)	Unemployed	Husband	Amandasig
2	37	F	Coloured	Married	2 (4 years and 11 months)	Unemployed	Husband	Capital Park
3	27	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Brother	Soshanguve
4	23	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Loan	Nellmapius
5	25	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Brother	Queenswood
6	29	F	Black	Married	None	Unemployed	Husband	Sunnyside
7	27	M	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Uncle	Mamelodi
8	28	F	Black	Single	None	Employed	Self	Atteridgeville
9	37	F	Black	Married	None	Employed	Self	Tembisa
10	33	F	Black	Married	1 (11 Years)	Unemployed	Husband	Soshanguve
11	39	F	White	Single	None	Employed	Self	Montana
12	26	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Bursary	Wapadrand
13	28	F	Black	Single	1 (5 Years)	Unemployed	Loan	Soshanguve
14	35	F	Black	Married	1 (9 Years)	Unemployed	Husband	Nellmapius
15	25	F	Black	Married	1 (3 Years)	Unemployed	Bursary	Sunnyside
16	24	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Loan	Sunnyside
17	26	F	Black	Single	None	Unemployed	Father	Sunnyside
18	48	F	Coloured	Divorced	2 (22 and 24 years)	Employed	Self	Eersterust

3.2.2 DISCUSSION ON THE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The demographic data of the participants at the Bright Site as depicted in Table 3.1 above seem to correlate largely with the demographic profile of the general Unisa student and also with the demographic profile of South Africa. Ntshoe (2010:35) asserts that Unisa provides an alternative route for students to acquire tertiary education, especially those students who cannot afford to study at a full-time traditional institution, who are more mature, who are in full-time employment and those female students having to care for and raise children.

The ages of the participants at the time of conducting the study ranged between 23 and 48 years of age with the average age being 31 years. This age range correlates with figures in Unisa's 2015 Strategic Plan (Unisa, 2005:3-4) where it is estimated that almost 13 million South Africans fall in the age cohort of 19-35 years and that internationally there are 150 million potential students also in the age range 19-35.

The gender representation of the participants at the Bright Site was female for all but one (see Table 3.1 above). This trend corresponds with Ntshoe's (2010:35) observation that there seems to be a considerable increase in the number of black female students studying at Unisa. According to Subotzky (2010), Unisa's women students have increased from 54% in 2004 to 60.2% in 2009. Within the context of social work, Schenck (2009:304) claims that traditionally social work has been known as a 'woman's career'.

Fifteen of the 18 participants who participated in this study were African; two were coloured and one was white. The racial picture of the participants at the Bright Site echoes the racial distribution of Unisa's student population. According to Unisa's 2009 HEMIS report the racial profile of students was as follows: African students constituted 64% of the total number of students, coloured students 5,8%, Indian students 8,9% and white students around 21,3% (Subotzky, 2010). These figures were based on the active headcount of Unisa's students for the period 2008-2009, totalling a number of 263 559 students (Subotzky, 2010).

Seven of the 18 participants were married, 10 were single and one divorced. Seven of the 18 participants had children who were still dependent on them and for whom they had to care. This trend that student social workers have dependants to care for is confirmed by a study undertaken in the United Kingdom, in that Collins, Coffey and Morris (2010:965) note that "social work students are mature people with commitments to other roles such as part-time jobs and to partners and children".

Fourteen of the 18 participants were unemployed with nine of the participants indicating that they were dependent on family members (husbands, uncles, and father) for financial assistance during the time of their studies. The other five unemployed participants studied

with either a loan (in the case of three participants) or a bursary (in the case of two participants). Only four participants were full-time employed and all of them indicated that they themselves paid for their own studies.

Only four of the participants stayed in the same geographical area, namely Sunnyside, in which Bright Site is situated. All the other participants stayed in or around the greater Pretoria area.

This section focused on the demographic data of the participants who participated in the study. The following section of this chapter will present the themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories (where applicable) which emerged from the processes of data analysis and the consequent consensus discussion between the researcher, the independent coder and the researcher's study leader, as well as written feedback provided on the transcripts of the interviews provided by the five participants who engaged in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

3.3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES, SUB-THEMES, CATEGORIES AND SUB-CATEGORIES

Six themes with accompanying sub-themes, categories and where applicable sub-categories emerged from the data gathered from participants during the three phases of data collection conducted in this study, namely letter writing by all participants (i.e. the whole population totalling 18 individuals), one focus group discussion with all participants, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five participants purposively selected from the population. The six main themes that emerged from this process were as follows:

Theme 1: *The participants' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting*

Theme 2: *The participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities*

Theme 3: *Participants' reflections on their experience of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting*

Theme 4: *Challenges experienced by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site*

Theme 5: *Support experienced by the participants while engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site*

Theme 6: *Suggestions from participants relating to (1) aspects of the social work practical placement setting and training that must remain unchanged, (2) the selection criteria for fourth-level students to be placed for their social work practical work placement at Bright Site, and (3) how to manage the challenges experienced during the social work practical training in this setting.*

These themes with sub-themes, categories and sub-categories are presented in the following table.

Table 3.2: Table of themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories

THEME 1: The Participants' Understanding and Experience of Bright Site as a Social Work Practical Work Placement Setting		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 1.1: The participants' understanding of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting		
Sub-theme 1.2: The participants' experiences of Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting	Category 1.2.1 The participants' statements relating to their experiences of and at Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting	
	Category 1.2.2 The participants' metaphors depicting their experiences of doing their social work practical work at Bright Site	
Sub-theme 1.3: Activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site	Category 1.3.1: Case, group, and community work as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site	
	Category 1.3.2: Performing of organisationally related duties (marketing of Bright Site, updating of Bright Site's database and assisting refugee mothers with their children) as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site	
	Category 1.3.3: Engaging in	

	supervision as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site	
	Category 1.3.4: The Friday training sessions as activity included in the social work practical work at Bright Site	Sub-category 1.3.4.1: The content of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site
		Sub-category 1.3.4.2: The value of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site
	Category 1.3.5: Meetings with the contact person as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site	Sub-category 1.3.5.1: The role of the contact person at Bright Site and the content of these meetings
		Sub-category 1.3.5.2: Participants' experiences related to the meetings with the contact person at Bright Site
Sub-theme 1.4: The participants' perceptions related to the advantages of being placed at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting	Category 1.4.1: The participants' perceptions of having more contact with lecturers were mentioned as an advantage of their placement at Bright Site.	
	Category 1.4.2: Being more knowledgeable and skilled as a result of the practical training opportunities at Bright Site was pointed out as an advantage	

	Category 1.4.3: Having had multi-cultural exposures was mentioned as another advantage of being placed at Bright Site	
Sub-theme 1.5 Personal qualities required to survive Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting		
Sub-theme 1.6: Participants' experiences related to the person centredness of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting		
Sub-theme 1.7: Personal changes experienced by participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site	Category 1.7.1: Personal changes experienced by the participants with reference to their <i>perceptions of believing in themselves</i> at three different times/phases during their social work practical work year at Bright Site	
	Category 1.7.2: A <i>new awareness of the individual self</i> of the participants as personal change experienced by the participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site	
	Category 1.7.3: Personal changes, relating to the <i>professional development</i> experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site	
	Category 1.7.4: Changes in the participants' <i>perceptions about other people</i> as personal change experienced by them through their social	

	work practical work placement at Bright Site	
THEME 2: The Participants' Experiences of Practical Work in Real Life Communities		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 2.1: The type of communities the participants did their social work practical work in		
Sub-theme 2.2: The value the participants attached to their learning experiences obtained about and from communities they worked with		
Sub-theme 2.3: The participants' perceptions about how communities benefited through their involvement in the communities		
THEME 3: Participants' Reflections on Their Experience of Supervision at Bright Site as Social Work Practical Work Placement Setting		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 3.1: The participants' understanding of supervision		
Sub-theme 3.2: The participants' experiences of the value of supervision		
Sub-theme 3.3: The participants' experiences of the supervisor as a person		
THEME 4: Challenges Experienced by Participants During Their Social Work Practical Work Training at Bright Site		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 4.1: Insufficient funds experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site		
Sub-theme 4.2: A lack of personal safety experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site		

Sub-theme 4.3: Working in groups at times experienced as a challenge by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site		
Sub-theme 4.4: High workload as a challenge experienced by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site		
THEME 5: Support Experienced by Participants While Engaging in Their Social Work Practical Work Training at Bright Site		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 5.1: External sources of support experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site		
Sub-theme 5.2: Internal sources of support from Bright Site as experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training	Category 5.2.1: The supervisors as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 5.2.2: The contact person as internal source of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 5.2.3: The lecturers as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 5.2.4: Fellow	

	students as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 5.2.5: The administrative facilities and secretary as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 5.2.6: Counselling received as internal source of support for the students during their social work practical work training at Bright	
<p>3.3.6 THEME 6: Suggestions from Participants relating to (1) Aspects of the Social Work Practical Placement Setting and Training That Must Remain Unchanged, (2) The Selection Criteria for Fourth-Level Students To Be Placed for Their Social Work Practical Work Placement at Bright Site, and (3) How To Manage the Challenges Experienced During the Social Work Practical Training at This Setting</p>		
SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Sub-theme 6.1: Participants' suggestions on aspects of the social work practical work placement setting and training at Bright Site that should remain unchanged.		
Sub-theme 6.2: Participants' suggestions on the selection criteria to be used for fourth level student social workers to be placed at Bright Site		
Sub-theme 6.3: Participants' suggestions on how to	Category 6.3.1: Participants'	

deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site	suggestions on how to deal with the hidden costs of the social work practical work training	
	Category 6.3.2: Participants' suggestions on how the high workload and time should be managed during the social work practical work training at Bright Site	
	Category 6.3.3: Participants' suggestions on how the safety issues in relation to their social work practical work training should be addressed	
	Category 6.3.4: Participants' suggestions on increased extra training needed in relation to the social work practical work	

In the next section of this chapter the themes with their accompanying sub-themes and categories and where applicable sub-categories will be presented and illustrated, underscored and/or confirmed by providing direct quotations¹³ from the letters the participants wrote, the focus group discussion and the transcripts from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The identified themes, sub-themes, categories, sub-categories and the complementing excerpts from the letters and transcripts will be discussed and contextualised within the body of knowledge available (i.e. literature control will be provided).

¹³ Preference was given regarding the participants' direct quotations from their story lines to being as true as possible to the participants' direct words and not to correct their sentence construction or use of grammar.

3.3.1 THEME 1: THE PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF BRIGHT SITE AS A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT SETTING

This theme unfolded in the following sub-themes:

Sub-theme 1.1: The participants' understanding of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

Sub-theme 1.2: The participants' experiences of the Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

Sub-theme 1.3: Activities included in the social work practical work placement at the Bright Site

Sub-theme 1.4: The participants' perceptions related to the advantages of being placed at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

Sub-theme 1.5 Personal qualities required to survive Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

Sub-theme 1.6: Participants' experiences related to the person centredness of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

Sub-theme 1.7: Personal changes experienced by participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

In the discussion below each of these sub-themes will be presented and discussed.

3.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: The participants' understanding of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

During the first phase of the data collection participants were instructed to write letters to their loved ones and in laymen's terms or in their own words explain what their understanding as student social worker was of their practical work placement at the Bright Site.

To contextualise this theme and provide a theoretical backdrop to this sub-theme the following literature review is summarised: The South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA] prescribed the exit level outcomes for students who wish to complete the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree in South Africa (SAQA., 2006[d]). Various exit levels have practical components, where students need to demonstrate and apply professional skills, intervention strategies and values (SAQA., 2006). In training student social workers the service provider or training institution, which in this study is Unisa, needs to provide practical placement settings

or field placements for students where their social work practical work training is conducted in order to meet the professional standards, and practical work requirements as set out by the Standard Generating Body (SGB) for Social Work (Lawlor, 2008:19). According to Lawlor (2008:19) “practical placements” or “field placements” refer to settings or contexts where students are placed for the completion of the practical work component of the BSW degree. Such settings or contexts are usually non-profit organisations, an office of the Department of Social Development or any other setting where professional social services are delivered (Lawlor, 2008:19). Lombard (2002:155) argues that such a field placement is a vital component for social work education and this is also the medium through which students get the opportunity to integrate knowledge and values in an agency setting. Unisa’s Department of Social Work, however, found it increasingly difficult to secure enough suitable practical work placements and, according to Van Dyk (2010), the coordination, monitoring and evaluation of students’ practical training (and subsequent field work placements, mostly at welfare organisations), became increasingly difficult due to the increase in student numbers which added pressure to the already limited resources of welfare organisations. Limited resources at organisations complicated practical placements that needed to be secured for every fourth-year student. Lombard (2002:155) challenges the traditional notion of field placements suggesting that the challenge in South Africa is for “student placements to break away from the more conventional settings and place social work students in rural and in semi-rural settings or peri-urban squatter settlements” in order to adequately prepare students for the role they should play as practitioners in the social and economic development of communities. These challenges impelled the Department of Social Work at Unisa to think *out of the box and commence* with the Bright Site as field work placement setting alongside the more traditional field work placements (Van Dyk, 2010).

The manner in which the participants articulated their understanding of a social work practical work placement setting seems to be in accord with the literature reviewed above. The participants understood their practical work placement setting as a place where they had the opportunity to apply their acquired knowledge and skills in completion of their degree. The following excerpts, taken from three of the letters written by participants, encapsulate this understanding participants had of a social work practical work placement setting:

“A practical placement is to be placed in an organisation, to be able to apply all the skills you have been studying in [social work] theory and put them in practice. In our placements we get an opportunity to engage with the clients, groups and communities”.

“We are ... placed at the Bright Site of Sunnyside organisation to do the practical work required of us in order to get our degree ... In essence the Bright Site of Sunnyside is a centre that was started by the Social Work Department because they

were struggling to find suitable organisations where the students could get their training and experience. They provide counselling services, group work and community work. All of these services are provided by us, the students”

“By the way Mom and Dad as you know that this is my final year, so I have to do my practical work and it is helping me to do what social workers do”.

Whilst the previous discussion centred on the participants’ understanding of their social work practical work placement within the context of the Bright Site, the next sub-theme illuminates the participants’ experiences of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement.

3.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: The participants’ experiences of Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

In order to facilitate a richer description and an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting, the researcher invited the participants to give a description of what Freedman and Combs (1996:97-98) would call the “landscape of action”. In exploring the landscape of action the researcher wanted to explore the “what”, “when”, “where”, and “how” of a story. Such a description of a story can facilitate conversations that provide specific details about events over a period of time (Morgan, 2000:34). Apart from requesting the participants, by means of letter writing, to *explain in their own words their understanding of a practical placement setting*, the researcher also requested the participants who were part of the semi-structured face-to-face interviews to *think of anything (a picture/a metaphor/a song/ a poem, a drama/or a story) that will express or best describe their experience of doing practical work at Bright Site*. From their written and verbal responses to this instruction this sub-theme emerged which subsequent to the consensus discussion was further divided into two categories which are depicted below:

Category 1.2.1 The participants’ statements relating to their experiences of and at Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

Category 1.2.2 The participants’ metaphors depicting their experiences of doing their social work practical work at Bright Site

(i) Category 1.2.1 The participants’ statements relating to their experiences of and at Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

The participants’ experiences of Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting seem to dovetail with Unisa’s Open and Distance Learning policy on student centredness which sees the students “as the main foci of the educational process and (who) are supported

to take progressive responsibility for their learning” (Unisa, 2008:2). The following excerpts from some of the participants’ letters and the transcriptions from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews gave rise to this category and sum up the experiences of the participants relating to Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting:

“As students in the Bright Site Sunnyside organisation we are treated as part of Staff...”

“... It [referring to the management style at Bright Site] is Person-centred because ...they asked us to express what we think is needed... The way they are doing things ... like when we are doing things they will ask the group how did they perceive what happened ...”

“During the block placement and the trainings, everything that you do is bottom-up [i.e. students’ inputs are sought and they are involved in decisions that affect them]. You [referring to the staff at Bright Site] take things to the students so that the students can try to find solutions and make decisions on their own. So I think you are person-centred...”

“...There was no top management, middle or lower. We [referring to staff and student social workers] all did the same, because we will sit down and discuss what is working and what is not”.

Other experiences related to and being at Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting were articulated by the participants along the following lines:

“Being at the organisation hasn’t always been about work. I have met and got to make friends with a lot of wonderful people....”

“ It [Bright Site] is an organised organisation... [we] have found that the management at the organisation is also great. I can go to them for help and not just on academic matters.... Further on this participant remarked: - “I’d say it [referring to where the Bright Site is situated] was very accessible, because for me it was in the centre of town. Then it was very easy for me to come and to go home... most of the students will die just to be put in this organisation”

(ii) Category 1.2.2 The participants’ metaphors depicting their experiences of doing their social work practical work at Bright Site

During the face-to-face semi-structured interviews metaphors were used in a supplementary manner in order to encourage or invite a richer description of the participants’ experiences but

also the meanings they attached to their experiences of doing social work practical work at Bright Site. Kruger, Lifschitz and Baloyi (2007:333) assert that within the indigenous African world view, traditions, wisdoms and knowledge are shared and transmitted through language in often unwritten and subtle ways. With fifteen of the eighteen participants (and four of the five taking part in the semi-structured face-to-face interviews) being of African descent, the researcher used metaphors in order to tap into these traditional ways of exploring and describing experiences. The metaphors used by the five participants who engaged in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, to portray their experiences related to doing their practical work at Bright Site are presented in the table below:

Table 3.3: Metaphors portraying participants' experiences relating to doing their social work practical work at Bright Site

PARTICIPANT	Metaphors Portraying Participants' Experiences Relating to Doing Their Social Work Practical Work at Bright Site
Participant M	<i>"And then it [referring to the placement at Bright Site] also helped me grow from day-to-day like a seed... Yes a plant seed, which was planted in an area where it was allowed to grow because I was nurtured in the soil. I would say I was watered every day, I will say I was given sunlight to blossom in and I was allowed to grow at my own time not being compared to the other plants and allowed my own pace of growing up and ... I turned out into a beautiful flower..... and, what I've realised from this flower, my roots ... they are very strong because I can stand the heat now and the winds and the storms".</i>
Participant B	<i>"...a song by R Kelly," I believe can fly" ... My experience was amazing I can say that. At first I was just a person not knowing my way forward...a little bit confused not knowing what is expected of me, but once I get started I was like... out there flying, wishing everyone could see me that I was this person doing this thing which was amazing".</i>
Participant J	<i>"When I started off at Bright Site I felt like snowflakes scattered all over the place and then by coming into Bright Site with the support and with the guidance that I received from, the supervisor, the lecturers and the contact person at Bright Site and fellow students of course, I turned into a snow woman. So I see myself as scattered snow flakes, moulded together into a snow woman. ... A snow woman is a woman ... that has gained knowledge and insight from a practical and theoretical perspective from the tuition, the supervision, and the contact that I have had".</i>
Participant S	<i>"[I] would use a metaphor of a blank page... When I came here I was this blank page, I didn't know what to expect ...academic[ally] of the university even profession[ally] of this organisation [referring to expectations and</i>

	practices], <i>even my own experience with this. So for me it was more like writing a book but you don't know what to put in the book. Your experience will provide the contents of the book.... It's no longer a blank page... I've experienced a lot of things this year [The participant referred to the demands of being in a committed relationship as a mother of a young child, being a student, as well as a friend] ... So all of those things make up the whole of me"</i>
Participant P	<i>"In the beginning of the year, it was like I was stuck between the rock and a hard place. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, and I was scared. You know if you are stuck between the rock and a hard place, you are scared for your life; you are scared that you are going to die. So for me at Bright Site I was scared to fail, that I was not good enough, if I will be able to make it at the end of the year. So I'll also thought about deregistering and I thought maybe this was not for me... and I must just stop this 4th year. So it was hard for me ... But after preparing for the final evaluations that rock that pressed me, was becoming much lighter. So I was able to move and breathe again".</i>

From the metaphors used by a cohort of participants to depict their experiences of doing social work practical work at Bright Site the researcher learned the Bright Site practical work placement setting provided amongst others a place for nurturing, opportunities for growing and developing at one's unique pace and of discovering and trusting one's own strengths and knowledge. Being placed at Bright Site and the social work practical work experienced allowed some of the participants to move from a place of uncertainty or not knowing in the beginning of the placement to being confident and personally and professionally integrated at the end. On the other hand, there were experiences especially at the outset of the placement of being uncertain about what the practical placement would entail, fear of failure and students feeling emotionally under pressure to be successful and master their practical work. By the time of the interviews all the participants who took part in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews had received their end-year marks and all five had succeeded which was accompanied by a sense of relief and completion.

Apart from elaborating on their experiences of Bright Site, the participants also disclosed information about the activities they engaged in whilst doing their social work practical work training at this placement setting. This aspect will be presented as the next sub-theme.

3.3.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Activities included in the social work practical work programme at the Bright Site were conducted within the parameters of the South African Qualifications Authority's (SAQA)

purpose, rationale and exit-level outcomes for the BSW qualification and will be referred to continuously in the discussion of this sub-theme (SAQA, 2006:1). The Bright Site also set itself out to dovetail social work practical work activities with Unisa's mission statement which, when referring to Unisa's 2015 Strategic Plan, (2005:7), amongst others, emphasises the endeavour to provide quality general academic and career-focused learning opportunities. Activities as mentioned in the categories below are therefore work-based and aimed at preparing student social workers for their professional careers. These career-based activities encompass practical work training in the three primary methods of social work (i.e. case, group and community work). At the Bright Site the participants were further involved in activities which relate to, complement, and support the participants' professional development. In this regard they were involved in certain organisational duties, and supervision. The sub-theme regarding activities included in social work practical work placement at Bright Site thus unfolded in the following categories:

Category 1.3.1: Case, group, and community work as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Category 1.3.2: Performing of organisationally related duties (marketing of Bright Site, updating of Bright Site's database and assisting refugee mothers with their children) as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site.

Category 1.3.3: Engaging in supervision as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Category 1.3.4: The Friday training sessions as activity included in the social work practical work at Bright Site

Category 1.3.5: Meetings with the contact person as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

The above categories will each be discussed as categories 1.3.1-1.3.5 in the following section.

(i) Category 1.3.1: Case, group, and community work as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

As part of SAQA's purpose and rationale for the Bachelor of Social Work qualification it is laid down that learners should be equipped with amongst others, "knowledge and understanding of human behaviour and social systems and the skills to intervene at the points where people interact with their environments in order to promote social well-being" (SAQA, 2006:1). One of the accompanying exit-level outcomes for learners is to "plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies and techniques at micro, mezzo and macro level" within

the range of individuals, families, groups and communities (SAQA, 2006:3). In adhering to this exit-level outcome, the Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting provides students with practical work opportunities by letting them engage in activities where they have to plan appropriate social work intervention strategies directed at the client-system on a micro, mezzo and a macro level. The following storylines testify to the activities related to case, group and community work the participants engaged in during their social work practical work at Bright Site:

“In our placements we get an opportunity to engage with the clients, groups and communities...”

“I do counselling with different people who are having problems in their lives. I also do group work with people who are having the same problems. The group usually consists of eight members and above but it should not be more than ten. People come together to talk about what they have encounter in life and support each other on how to solve their problems. I also do community work where we work with different people who we help to recognize that they have the potential to work on their problems and do something about it. It works with helping the people to start projects”.

“...and we are also responsible for intakes”

(ii) Category 1.3.2: Performing of organisationally related duties (marketing of Bright Site, updating of Bright Site’s database and assisting refugee mothers with their children) as activities included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

The Bright Site aspires to instil and enhance graduate attributes, skills, values and discipline in their students which could be transferred from the practical experiences and teaching context into real life employment realities (Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann 2004:313-314). In addition SAQA’s purpose and rationale (with the accompanying exit-level outcomes and critical cross-field outcomes) for the BSW qualification determine that:

- Learners should be equipped to work effectively with others within a team, group, organisation and community, other professionals and organisations in social service delivery.
- Learners should also have the ability to access and utilise resources.
- Learners should be able to organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly.
- Learners should be able to communicate effectively (SAQA, 2006:1, 4 & 5).

In response to the aforementioned desire to enhance students' graduate attributes and the prescription to equip learners to work effectively with others in a team or a group, with other professionals, organisations and the community, students doing their social work practical work at Bright Site were divided into teams for the purpose of performing certain organisational duties. Although the organisation (Bright Site) identified these activities, based on the needs of the organisation and the client-system, "how" these activities were to be executed was partially co-constructed with the students. Students had to compile their own operational plan for each of the organisational duties, and they themselves had to decide how and what they wanted to achieve regarding either marketing, the up-keep of the data base or the assistance of refugee mothers. In line with contextualising study material relevant to the African milieu (in which our students operate) as well as the constructivist approach, Louw (2010:50) encourages such an involvement of students in their own learning experience and asserts that students' voices should be heard, and that students should take responsibility and the initiative for their own learning,, and also calls for a closer collaboration between academics and students. Within the service-learning milieu, Score (2010:79) regards increased student involvement, engagement and participation as one of the advantages of service-learning.

Students were divided into three groups consisting of five to eight students with each group respectively responsible for the following;

- The marketing of Bright Site: The marketing team was responsible for the marketing of student services (case work, group work, and community development services) to other service providers, the Unisa community and the broader Sunnyside community. Marketing activities done by the students consisted of a monthly Newsletter to Unisa lecturers, fellow students and other service providers within Sunnyside, which updated the recipients of these Newsletters on various activities done by students. The Marketing team also co-presented two oral papers with staff members from the Department of Social Work at Unisa at two national conferences. (One conference focused on the theme of "service-learning" whilst the other had "community engagement" as its central theme.) Furthermore, the Marketing team was also responsible for marketing the services of the Bright Site to the community of Sunnyside by means of an awareness walk. Lastly, this team produced a DVD on the students' practical work services of the year. As will be mentioned later in this report, this team had a far higher work load than the other two teams due to the snowball effect of their marketing services.
- The team responsible for the upgrading of the Bright Site's data base: The data base team's tasks revolved around the upkeep and updating of the Bright Site data base. This data base provided the students and staff of Bright Site with information regarding community resources available to them in the execution of their practical work. Students had to visit different social service providers in Sunnyside and determine in what way

Bright Site and the relevant service provider could share resources, utilise each other as source for referrals or find any other way of working together.

- The team assisting refugee mothers with their children: This team took care of the children of refugee mothers who attended English literacy classes (a service offered under the auspices of the Bright Site) twice a week during the course of the year.

In all of the above teams, students were challenged to work as part of a team with fellow students, staff members of the organisation, other professionals, service providers and community members. The activities the participants engaged in whilst doing their social work practical training at the Centre under discussion became evident from the responses of participants during phases one and three of the data collection, namely in their letter writing and individual interviews. Students did not make mention of these activities during the focus group discussion. Quotations from participants depicting their organisational duties are illustrated in the table below.

Table 3.4: Quotations from participants relating to organisational duties

Quotations from Participants' Letters Relating to Organisational Duties	Quotations from Participants' Interviews Relating to Organisational Duties
Marketing of Bright Site	
<i>"We chose to be in the marketing team. We write a monthly newsletter and we have arranged two events. The one was for World Social Workers Day, (I never knew it existed before now), and the other we had to man a stall in Burgers Park where other people like Life Line and other service providers got together to talk about and exhibit the services they offer".</i>	<i>"When we did the presentation about our work here, the marketing and the data base, it taught me to stand in front of a crowd of people and present your work I know I'm a shy person but since I came to Bright Site I know how to stand there and present whatever I want. Because presentation it's part of my career. I'm going to have to stand up in front of people and present myself".</i>
Update of Bright Site's database	
<i>"This year we were even given a chance to do organisational work, which include database..."</i>	<i>"...your work at the organisation, which consisted of... students responsible for ... the updating of data base"</i>
Assisting refugee mothers with their children	
<i>"This year we were even given a chance to do organisational work, which include ... babysitting for student refugees in English classes".</i>	<i>"...your work at the organisation, which consisted of ... students responsible for the refugees mothers..."</i>

Not only did the participants make mention of the organisational duties in the team context they were engaged in whilst doing their social work practical work training at the Bright Site, but they also articulated their experiences in this regard.

The participants' experiences related to the performing of the organisational duties referred to above and to their taking co-ownership and/or co-responsibility for these are encapsulated in the following excerpts:

"... they [referring to the students also participants] need to be responsible for their own learning, they need to act like a professional you should not need to be spoon-fed, so you have to go out there, maybe go to the library, seek for information and stuff. You must be a hard worker and you must be a team player ... there was no top management, middle or lower. You all did the same, because we will sit down and discuss what is working and what is not".

"The students themselves set the goals. It was very exciting to work in those different groups, because we'll want to achieve what we set out to do. Like I will say in my group, we'll have monthly meetings and weekly meetings to check on the services that we have to do and it gave us a chance to act as chairpersons once and then rotate. We all had those responsibilities...we all find it within us that we had to set goals for the group. Even when we do our presentations to other professionals who'll come and visit us, each group felt it within them that we have to be the best group".

"...also the one thing that I loved the most, was that each and every student's idea is important. They [referring to Bright Site management] take it into consideration and they find ways to fit it into the organisation. So our ideas were taken into consideration. We'll also reach out to management that we think this is not working, this is working".

"Students can at Bright Site interact more with each other and share with one another especially when you have your little other groups, the marketing, data base and group assisting refugee mothers, and in there [whilst doing the organisational work] you do not necessarily talk about just marketing but you can talk about what happened within the training session ["Friday training"¹⁴] and some of these things you can relate to your marketing and be able to bring out the knowledge and skills that you have gained there".

¹⁴ The Bright Site decided to focus on extra training, added on, or training not covered by, but complementing the fourth-year practical work curriculum outcomes. The training thus related to their practical work and focused on enhancing the students' practical case work and group work as well as community work skills and knowledge. This training occurred every Friday morning for two hours (refer to Category 1.3.4 and Sub-category 1.3.4.1 below).

Another activity mentioned by the participants who did their social work practical work training at Bright Site was that of supervision. This activity will be presented and discussed in the next section of this chapter.

(iii) Category 1.3.3: Engaging in supervision as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Students did their practical work under the guidance of supervisors, who are all qualified social workers registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions, and appointed by the Bright Site. Thabede and Green (2010:6) explain the tasks of a student supervisor as follows: “to assist students to integrate theory and practice, to develop their professional skills, and to develop values and attitudes required by the profession”. The following excerpts taken from transcripts from all three phases of the data collection point to the fact that students engaged in supervision as an activity whilst doing their social work practical work training at Bright Site:

Table 3.5: Quotations from participants relating to supervision as activity engaged in during social work practical work training at Bright Site

Phase Of Data Collection	Quotations from Participants relating to Supervision as Activity Included in Their Social Work Practical Work Training at Bright Site
Letter writing	<p><i>“Supervision is when...supervisors... guide us on the use of theory in our process when working with people”.</i></p> <p><i>“The supervisor is also there if I need any help...Supervision is a place where we get support and direction on our practical work”.</i></p>
Focus group discussion	<p><i>“... we are allowed to arrange with the supervisors on dates and times to meet for supervision”.</i></p>
Semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews	<p><i>“Part of my training involves weekly supervision meetings”.</i></p>

This category which identified the engagement in supervision as an activity included in the social work practical work training at Bright Site, cross-references with a later discussion below as theme three where the researcher reflects on students' experiences of supervision and this sub-theme must be read in conjunction with the theme to follow.

The “Friday training sessions” emerged as another activity the participants engaged in whilst doing the social work practical work training at Bright Site. These “Friday training sessions” will be presented as a category in next part of this chapter.

(iv) Category 1.3.4: The Friday training sessions as activity included in the social work practical work at Bright Site

This category unfolded in the following two sub-categories:

Sub-category 1.3.4.1: The content of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site

Sub-category 1.3.4.2: The value of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site

(a) Sub-category 1.3.4.1: The content of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site

The Bright Site decided to focus on extra training, added on, or training not covered by, but complementing the fourth-year practical work curriculum outcomes. The training thus related to their practical work and focused on enhancing the students’ practical case work and group work as well as community work skills and knowledge. This interactive training dovetailed with the exit-levels and accompanying critical cross field outcomes for the BSW degree relating to the students’ ability to develop and maintain professional social work relationships with client systems, the ability to plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies, as well as the ability to demonstrate ethical and professional behaviour (SAQA 2006:3, 4, & 5). The participants referred to these Friday training sessions and the contents included in these training sessions along the following lines:

“All the students have to be at Bright Site for training every Friday”.

“Every Friday we go for trainings on different levels for professionalism...”

“These training sessions range from how to meet new people, at the beginning of the year when we were all scared to go into our communities, to the last training session where we had a retired presiding officer [Magistrate of a children’s court]. I was so nervous that I may say the wrong thing, but she was really nice and explained to us what social workers need to write in their reports for the Children’s Court and how important a job a social worker has in protecting children”.

“[the training for] two to three hours on a Friday morning linked to curriculum outcomes”.

"[The facilitator responsible for training relating to statutory work with children and the Child Care Act] ... took us through what it entails to be professional social workers, she gave us different training materials and as a group we then had to learn to use these materials. For instance she attended to play therapy. You always knew about the word play therapy but never knew what it entails; now we know what it entails. She [referring to the above mentioned facilitator] always said you have to create a conducive environment for the child to be able to open up to you because they do not always open up to you. But if you can just sit with the child, be with the child or be a child in that moment the child will be able to relate to you".

The participants did not only refer to the content of the Friday training as one of the activities included in the social work practical work placement at the Bright Site, they also articulated the value of these training sessions as discussed in the following section.

(b) Sub-category 1.3.4.2: The value of the Friday training sessions at Bright Site

The purpose of the Friday trainings was to bridge the typical ODL gap which refers to the distance between students and their training institution, their courseware, and fellow students (Unisa, 2008[a]:27). It is in view of the existence of this ODL gap that Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:7-8) observed a need to compensate for and bridge the typical ODL gap regarding students who, are underprepared for higher education, and to break the isolation between students and their study material, students and peers, and students and lecturers. Within the context of service-learning and on the Internet Home Page of Community Service-Learning (Community Service-learning Centre, 2011) it is asserted that service-learning would therefore "encourage interactive teaching methods and reciprocal learning between students and faculty".

In excerpts from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the participants spoke about the value of the Friday training sessions along the following lines:

"What made the Friday training valuable was the intensity of it, because at the normal 4th year workshops there are more students than at the Friday training at Bright Site. I won't say you get individual attention but the group is much smaller".

"The Friday trainings ... were very helpful because that's where we got an opportunity to sit down with the managers of the organisation, for them to give us direction of where we're supposed to go...they also give you training on group work and case work and let us do it practically especially on our first block placement".

“[In those Friday training meetings] ... I have learned to share with people and not to hold back what I feel. I was able to voice out what I think will be needed and also what I fear or what I think is important”.

Apart from the Friday training meetings, the participants referred to another activity they had to attend to whilst doing their social work practical work training and that was to have meetings with the contact person at the Bright Site. This aspect will now become the focus of the next discussion.

(v) Category 1.3.5: Meetings with the contact person as activity included in the social work practical work placement at Bright Site

This category unfolded in the following sub-categories:

Sub-category 1.3.5.1: The role of the contact person at Bright Site and the content of these meetings

Sub-category 1.3.5.2: Participants’ experiences related to the meetings with the contact person at Bright Site

(a) Sub-category 1.3.5.1: The role of the contact person at Bright Site and the content of these meetings

Practical work at Unisa, as outlined in the Administrative Guide for Unisa Supervisors and Contact Persons, describes the contact person as the person who represents the organisation where the fourth level students are placed for their studies (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2011:4). The contact person should orientate the students into the organisation regarding organisational policy and procedures. This also includes practical issues relating to the organisation’s dress code, punctuality and ethical behaviour. The contact person is thus responsible for monitoring and co-ordinating the student’s practical work, with the expectation that the student should take and initiate the responsibility to liaise with the contact person in order to report on her/his practical work progress at the organisation (Department of Social Work Unisa, 2011:4 &13). The following quotations from three of the participants interviewed face-to-face by the researcher demonstrate the participants’ recognition of the role of the contact person in the guidance and monitoring of their practical work.

“...bi-weekly meetings [were held] with the Bright Site contact person who monitored the worked done in the different modules”.

"...we learned [from the contact person] a lot about ethics and working in an organisation; how to dress when coming to work, how to communicate when working with people of different cultures, how to take part in team work".

"she [referring to the contact person] had meetings with us where everyone shared what was happening in the community... it was...when they want feedback from me the social work student".

Participants' descriptions of the meetings with the contact person were on a content level as just discussed, but meanings were also attached to this activity and will be discussed below.

(b) Sub-category 1.3.5.2: Participants' experiences related to the meetings with the contact person at Bright Site

The participants had conflicting experiences relating to their meetings with the contact person. On the one hand, the contact was experienced as supportive and beneficial but then frustrations were also expressed. Creswell (2009:192) encourages researchers to "also present negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes. Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce" Presenting the discrepancies adds to the validity and credibility of the account and makes it more real and realistic. The participants' experiences related to the meetings with the contact person are presented in the table below:

Table 3.6: Storylines depicting participants' experiences related to the meetings with the contact person

Supportive and Beneficial Experiences Relating to the Meetings with the Contact Person	Experiences Counter-Beneficial to the Meetings with the Contact Person
<p><i>"[meetings with the contact person]...it made me develop that self-confidence ... the support that I get from the contact person".</i></p> <p><i>"she [referring to the contact person] has been very supportive meaning...to ease our anxieties...".</i></p> <p><i>"Our Contact Person, T, is so considerate, helpful and supportive ... She keeps us on</i></p>	<p><i>"Sometimes you will come here for a meeting with your contact person then only to find out that she is busy and she cannot attend to you, sometimes it is frustrating because you need the feedback urgently...".</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes you will get a confusion of meetings...yes sometimes they will arrange meeting for you to only found out it is cancelled...".</i></p>

<i>our toes and is always assisting and reminding us if we have fallen behind with ...our weekly process reports”.</i>	
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In the preceding discussion the researcher reported on the various activities participants were engaged in while doing their social work practical training at the Bright Site. The participants made reference to being involved in the following activities during their social work practical work placement and training at this placement setting: doing case, group and community work, performing various organisational related duties (i.e. marketing of Bright Site, updating of Bright Site’s database and assisting refugee mothers with their children), engaging in supervision and extra training on a Friday, and lastly having their meetings with the contact person at Bright Site.

Linked with the participants’ understanding of and experience at the Bright Site another sub-theme emerged, namely that of participants’ perceptions of the advantages related to being placed at the Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting. This sub-theme will now be discussed.

3.3.1.4 Sub-theme 1.4: The participants’ perceptions related to the advantages of being placed at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

This sub-theme also unfolded as such in the following categories:

<p>Category 1.4.1: The participants’ perceptions of having more contact with lecturers were mentioned as an advantage of their placement at Bright Site</p> <p>Category 1.4.2: Being more knowledgeable and skilled as a result of the practical training opportunities at Bright Site was pointed out as an advantage</p> <p>Category 1.4.3: Having had multi-cultural exposures was mentioned as another advantage of being placed at Bright Site</p>

Each of these categories will now be discussed:

(i) Category 1.4.1: The participants’ perceptions of having more contact with lecturers were mentioned as an advantage of their placement at Bright Site

This sub-theme was not explicitly stated as an advantage but was implied in the participant’s statements about their contact with lecturers at Bright Site. Some of the lecturers at the Department of Social Work at Unisa are, over and above their normal academic responsibilities, also actively involved at Bright Site where they act as supervisors, facilitators

of the Friday training sessions and/or as student counsellors. From the information shared in the letters written by the participants and excerpts from the transcribed face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the participants' accounts of having contact with the lecturers were mentioned along the following lines:

"We are in contact with our lecturers".

"You are in contact with the lecturers. So you, sort-of... are no longer intimidated when you see them. So unlike other students they tell us they would be intimidated".

"Because Unisa is a distance learning institution, from first year to third year, we don't have an experience like this where we work hand-in-hand with our lecturers, our supervisors and the organisation".

"The supervisors they know their stuff, some are lecturers from Unisa and they know PCA [the Person Centred Approach]. Like other students who are placed somewhere in other organisations, they're supervised by supervisors who are not Unisa lecturers. So they don't know PCA that much. That's my opinion".

As an advantage of the participants' social work practical work placement at Bright Site they also perceived the advantage of having more training opportunities which in return resulted in the advantage of becoming more knowledgeable and skilled. This will now be presented as a further category.

(ii) Category 1.4.2: Being more knowledgeable and skilled as a result of the practical training opportunities at Bright Site was pointed out as an advantage

As a result of all the learning opportunities (i.e. activities and duties the participants had to perform whilst doing their social work practical work training at Bright Site, namely: Friday trainings, organisational duties, case, group and community work) they felt that they were more knowledgeable and skilled than their counterparts. This correlates with Bell's (2007:152) findings relating to the impact and outcome of service-learning at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal where students were very positive about what they perceived they had gained from their service-learning experience. These students in Bells' study felt that amongst others they had improved their leadership and communication skills with a greater ability to apply subject matter, and recommended that service-learning should be practised in more university classes. Tynjala as cited by Walsh and Kotzee (2010:40) also challenged Higher Education Institutions to focus not only on theoretical subject content but also the development of informal skills and knowledge which students will need in their professional life.

The following utterances made by three of the participants seem to reflect this development of extending mere subject specific knowledge where participants regarded themselves to be more knowledgeable, equipped and skilled than their counterparts as a result of the various training opportunities they were exposed to during their practical social work training at Bright Site:

“There is a very huge difference (between us and other students) because of the things that we do and here at Bright Site...here [referring to the Bright Site] we were exposed to presentations [students practised their presentation skills regularly throughout the year] early on so with them [referring to the other students] they only do a presentation in the mid-year and in the final evaluations. And the other thing is the organisational work [which] is something you are going to use in future so it sort-of add experience on yourself”.

“We were exposed to those subjects by preparing things like the business plans, how to work in a group, teamwork... most of the students will die just to be put in this organisation [i.e. The Bright Site]. I notice the difference between us and other students, especially when we went for workshops. We were well prepared, we knew what was going on in all the practical subjects, and we were ahead of the other students... because we were given an opportunity to do it on a practical basis in the organisation”.

“I believe we were [theoretically] advantaged... because we’re exposed to lecturers ... the supervisors they know their stuff...”

As the following discussion will indicate the participants also perceived having multi-cultural exposure as an advantage of their placement.

(iii) Category 1.4.3: Having had multi-cultural exposures was mentioned as another advantage of being placed at Bright Site

Various sources indicate that service-learning increases the learners’ access to and learning experiences about cultural diversity: Kielsmeier (2011:6) asserts that service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect amongst all participants. In another study by Simons, Williams, Hirshinger-Blank, Willis, Dry, Floyd and Russell (date unknown:25) on culturally based service-learning, their 82 participants mentioned the value of their service-learning experience in that it increased their multi-cultural competencies. This is echoed on the Internet Home Page of The Community Service-Learning Centre (2011) that highlights one of the benefits of service-learning as students’ growth and understanding of diverse cultures and communities. In view of this the global standards for the education and training of social work professions prescribe that learning institutions should aspire to create

opportunities for increased knowledge about and exposure to cultural and ethnic diversity (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005:223).

The following quotations, two from participants who were individually interviewed, and an account of another two (who were working in a group of two participants) put down in a letter to a loved one, make reference to the experience of and benefit relating to multi-cultural exposure:

“[A] valuable experience was going out into the community and dealing with these, I won’t say strange people [of a different culture], but people I have never dealt with before”.

“...working in a group had its own ups and downs ... firstly our values and attitudes are not the same and we were a mixture of different cultures”.

“At the Bright Site Sunnyside we interact with different cultures from other countries...Being involved with my refugees [women] as a community was a great learning process. ... I learned about the life of a refugee woman in a foreign country and I also learned that they are just people who need someone to listen to them, accept them as they are and need to be respected thou they are in a foreign country”.

In the previous discussion the advantages perceived and experienced by the participants as a result of their placement at Bright Site were presented. In the discussion to follow, the researcher will give an account of the personal qualities the participants perceived a student social worker must possess to survive the placement at Bright Site.

3.3.1.5 Sub-theme 1.5: Personal qualities required to survive Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting

The participants were of the view that in order for a student to survive at Bright Site, he or she needs to be committed, disciplined, focused and have the ability to work independently.

The following quotations are provided in confirmation of this sub-theme:

“...one needs to be disciplined and committed”.

“You have to believe in yourself... because of the challenges and you feel that you won’t be able to make it but if you believe in yourself I think you can really... manage”.

“I would say that the students have to be able to work independent[ly]... And the other thing I would say...from looking at the workload it also needs a committed

person. If you are not committed, the workload will be overwhelming for you and you wouldn't be able to cope with that".

"... You have to be a person who is very ambitious, ... in the sense that you have to know what you want with your practicals, and then you have to know that here is an organisation that you will gain from but for you to gain you have to also give something. And then you have to be a person who's willing to achieve something at the end of the year because you cannot just come to the organisation and expect them to feed you everything; you also have to be willing to give your services to them".

To link up with this sub-theme and the supporting storylines, Bourn and Bootle (2005:348) underscore the fact that studying part-time requires self-discipline. On the Internet Home Page of The Community Service-Learning Centre (2001) it is noted that service-learning "boost[s] course enrollment by attracting highly motivated and engaged students". Within the Unisa context, Lintvelt's (2008:35) study on the personal contexts of undergraduate students in social work at Unisa, showed that participants used words like "self-motivated, confident, hard worker, committed" in order to describe the way they perceive themselves which resonates with the personal qualities the participants viewed as important for success in their social work practical work training at the Bright Site.

3.3.1.6 Sub-theme 1.6: Participants' experiences related to the person centredness of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting

The rationale for exploring the person centredness of the Bright Site needs to be seen against the backdrop of Unisa's drive towards student support as well as the developmental approach of South African social welfare policy. Being student centred in its directives regarding student support and the development and facilitation of flexible learning programmes are some of the focal points of Unisa as open and distance learning institution (Unisa, 2008:2). Within the context of South African social welfare the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) proposed a developmental approach¹⁵ to social welfare with the further implication of a people centred¹⁶ approach to social and economic development (cf. Department of Social Development South Africa, nd). Fitting with Unisa's focus as well as the Department of Social Services' developmental approach (Patel 2003:1, Lombard, 2010:1-2.), education and training at

¹⁵ Lombard (2010:4, 8) cites Midgley's view in highlighting some key aspects of the developmental approach where it is seen as a *dynamic* process of enhancing people's welfare in which their *social and economic* development is intertwined and seen as two sides of the same coin. Development is *inclusive* for the whole population, it is a *comprehensive* response to *current* social problems towards the wellbeing of today's society, and it provides a *broad macro perspective* on social welfare implementing a *variety of strategies* in bettering the level of living.

¹⁶ Lombard (2010: 8) cites Giddens in Patel when referring to citizen participation as one of the key premises of the developmental approach, where service delivery should not just be in the interest and to the benefit of those receiving it but where those affected by service delivery are included and actively involved in the service delivery as well as the decision making process relating to those services.

Unisa's Department of Social Work is embedded in, and presented with the Rogerian Person Centred Approach [PCA] (Van Dyk, 2000:29). Facilitating social work practical work training from a PCA perspective requires one to ask critical questions relating to the “*what*” and “*how*” of social work practical work training; and to be more specific, to ask: In what way did training at the Bright Site model a person centred approach, and in what way did training invite the participation of the student, taking his/her frame of reference into account? (cf. Grobler et al., 2003:68-74). The following storylines confirm that the Department of Social Work at Unisa and subsequently the Bright Site as well, strive to be person or student centred in their day-to-day activities and practices:

“During the block placement and the trainings, everything that you [referring to Bright Site management] do is bottom-up. You take things to the students so that the students can try to find solutions and make decisions on their own. So I think you are person-centred”.

“... they [referring to the Bright Site management] allow us to change on our own, and they build good rapport, a good relationship with their students. It's like when you offer counselling, at the end of the day the person, he or she, is the one who's going to take the decision to say this will work for me or, this is how I can change. They practise the person-centred approach”.

“It [referring to the social work practical work training programme at Bright Site] is Person-centred because it works according to our schedule...and then also our frame of reference because they ... asked us to express what we think is needed... The way they are doing things ... like when we are doing things they will ask the group how did they perceive what happened ... or how have you done”.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the participants' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a Social Work practical work placement setting was the personal changes experienced by students through such placement at Bright Site and will be discussed in the next section.

3.3.1.7 Sub-theme 1.7: Personal changes experienced by participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Through the social work practical work placement at Bright Site participants could identify and describe various personal changes in themselves. Theron (2008:2 & 20) argues that before change agents (referring to practitioners, community workers, consultants) “can change others they have to change themselves and their consciousness”. He challenges practitioners to become aware of their own contradictions, weaknesses, and prejudices. Within the context

of service-learning the Internet Home Page of the Community Service-Learning Centre (2011) asserts that one of the benefits of service-learning is that students improve their ability to be open to change. The following categories that emerged from this sub-theme confirm the literature in that the utterances made by the participants point to the fact that they experienced personal changes during exposure to service-learning whilst doing their social work practical work training at the setting under discussion:

Category 1.7.1: Personal changes experienced by the participants with reference to their *perceptions of believing in themselves* at three different times/phases during their social work practical work year at Bright Site

Category 1.7.2: A *new awareness of the individual self* of the participants as personal change experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Category 1.7.3: Personal changes, relating to the *professional development*, experienced by the participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Category 1.7.4: Changes in the participants' *perceptions about other people* as personal change experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

These categories will be presented in the discussion to follow:

(i) Category 1.7.1: Personal changes experienced by the participants with reference to their *perceptions of believing in themselves* at three different times/phases during their social work practical work year at Bright Site

During the face-to-face semi-structured interviews the researcher requested the participants she had interviewed to complete the following three sentences:

"When I started my practical work at Bright Site I believed that....

six months later I believed that....

by the end of my first year I believed that".

The responses provided by the participants gave rise to this category and in the table below the storylines are provided. These storylines testify to the personal changes experienced by the participants with reference to their perceptions of believing in themselves at three stages during their social work practical work training at the Bright Site.

Table 3.7: Storylines testifying to the personal changes in participants' perceptions related to believing in themselves as experienced by four participants at three stages during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Participants' Perceptions of Believing in Themselves at the Beginning of the Year	Participants' Perceptions of Believing in Themselves Midway into the Year	Participants' Perceptions of Believing in Themselves at the End of the Year
Participant M: <i>"When I started, I believed that I wouldn't make it [participant laughs] reason being it was my first experience working with real people and I was scared, what will happen to me".</i>	Participant M: <i>"Six months later... I [was] starting to take big footsteps, that I'm on the right track and I've been trained in a way that I see where I'm going".</i>	Participant M: <i>"Then towards the end, I believed that the organisation brought me up rightly, because I managed to achieve their goals and my goals for the year".</i>
Participant J: <i>"When I started my practical work at Bright Site I believed that I could not do it..."</i>	Participant J : <i>"... six months later I believed ... that I had the potential".</i>	Participant J: <i>"By the end of my first year I believed ...in myself".</i>
Participant S: <i>"When I reviewed the work [at the beginning] it was truly overwhelming... and also looking at the days that I was expected to come here, I couldn't afford it, so I believed I was going to deregister".</i>	Participant S: <i>"After six months I believed that I've come so far so it's no use for me to believe that I wouldn't find a way to come here. There was always a way to address your difficulties..."</i>	Participant S: <i>"...and after my first year, I feel that I can come back next year to Bright Site".</i>
Participant P: <i>"When I first came here, I knew that it was not going to be easy but I believed that I could make it".</i>	Participant P: <i>"...and I thought maybe after six months, it would be different, the work will be much lighter... but after six months it was worse... Everything ... most of my assignments were late and I was worried about that".</i>	Participant P: <i>"But after preparing for the final evaluations that rock that pressed me, was becoming much lighter. So I was able to move and breathe again".</i>

The storylines above bear testimony to the fact that the participants' were very scared and displayed very little belief in their own abilities at the outset of their social work practical work training. Except for one participant, their belief in themselves had evolved by mid-year, and

towards the end of this year students had a sense of accomplishment and belief in their own abilities.

A new awareness of the individual self of the participants emerged as another category from the sub-theme under discussion and will be presented next.

(ii) Category 1.7.2: A new awareness of the individual self of the participants as personal change experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Through the participants' involvement with their social work practical work placement at Bright Site they became aware of a new individual self. Various authors mention the fact of personal changes occurring amongst students during and as a result of their studies and exposure to practical work and training. In a study by O'Connor and Cordova (2010:366) relating to the experiences of adults who work full-time while attending graduate school part-time participants all saw themselves as "having a new self" as a consequence of their learning experience. Globally, the standards for the education and training of social work professions propose that social work training institutions should "secure that students are provided with opportunities to develop self-awareness regarding personal, and cultural values, beliefs, traditions and biases and how it might influence the ability to develop relationships with people and work with diverse population groups" (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005:223). In response to the aforementioned proposal Unisa's Department of Social Work tries to fulfil this mandate. Thabede and Green's (2010:6) interviews with fourth level students, as part of the audit on the Department's programme, reveals that the current mechanism for practical work enables students to:

- "become self-reliant"
- "learn about myself"
- "observe how a social worker helps clients".

The utterances (in the table below) made by the participants in this research project do not only underscore the statements made by the students interviewed by Thabede and Green (2010), but also gave rise to this sub-theme and resonate with the literature referred to.

Table 3.8: Storylines pointing to a new awareness of the individual self of the participants as personal change experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

<p>A Quotation Taken from One of the Participants' Letters</p>	<p><i>"I have gone through so many changes. The biggest one ...I have become more focused... The demands of this year seem to have brought about in me a strength I never knew I had... I have discovered a more confident and assertive part of myself... in a way that makes you less afraid to go out there and try new things. I think I have become braver. My favourite saying is that, 'yes I'm afraid at times but I will go ahead and do it anyway'... I guess in a way my priorities have changed. I've surprised myself with the level of discipline I have put in my studies and work".</i></p>
<p>A Quotation Taken from the Focus Group Discussion</p>	<p><i>"You will discover strengths that you did not think you have".</i></p>
<p>A Quotation Taken from One of the Transcripts from a Face-to-Face Interview</p>	<p><i>"I turned out into a beautiful flower and, what I've realised from this flower, my roots ... they are very strong because I can stand the heat now and the winds and the storms".</i></p>

(iii) Category 1.7.3: Personal changes, relating to professional development, experienced by the participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

In distinguishing between the "graduate" and "non-graduate" person, Barrie (2006:215) asked what in essence would constitute such a distinction and what are the attributes, skills, and knowledge that should be included on the graduate "shopping list". He refers to the generic graduate attributes as the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates which go beyond the subject specific or disciplinary knowledge and which are applicable in a range of contexts resulting from completing any undergraduate degree. The academic communities are not all on the same page in their understanding, prioritisation and implementation of what he calls "graduateness" with various conceptions informing the differences in orientation. The most fitting conceptualisation of graduateness, also evident in the Bright Site as a Service-learning Centre, is the enabling perspective where graduateness will refer to the learners' ability to "shape and transform knowledge to meet new challenges and contexts" which includes intellectual and personal development (Barrie, 2006:229-231, & 234). The personal changes experienced by the participants at Bright Site, as result of their social work practical

work placement experiences, were noted not only in relation to their professional but also personal development and in preparing them for practice. The storylines of the participants speak of this personal and professional development enabling them to transfer not only skills but also attitudes within and to the real life context. Examples of the supporting storylines follow:

“Being involved with the girls [the participant did her group and community work practical work at a place of Safety for teenage girls] helped me to learn a lot in working with teenagers...The theory we have studied and how to apply it in practice, the skills and techniques and all the professional experience we learned from the Bright Site Sunnyside will guide us in working with people as social workers. Our communication skills, values and respect will guide us on the long journey ahead of us”.

“I can see now why it is so important to do a practical placement in fourth year as this supervised experience is certainly preparing me for the real world out there as a social worker”.

During a face-to-face interview one of the participants noted that as a result of the practical placement at Bright Site she had discovered *“That I really have the ability to work with other people and that I also have the potential to learn from other people”* [i.e. referring to her interaction with peers at the Bright Site but also having the ability to learn from the community, as informal settlement, where she was placed to do her practical work training]

A last category that emerged under this sub-theme of personal changes experienced by the participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site was that of changes in the participants’ perceptions about other people. This category will now be presented.

(iv) Category 1.7.4: Changes in the participants’ *perceptions about other people* as personal change experienced by them through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Through utilising their communication and listening skills, the participants learned about and from other people resulting in changes in their perceptions of these people. These changes in the perceptions of other people are in resonance with what Swanepoel and de Beer (2006:50) describe as the important attitude a worker should have in connecting and working with a community. The storylines of participants mirrored this attitude as a willingness to learn from the people, respect for people as human beings, an appreciation of the local knowledge and

wisdom of the people, compassion for people suffering, and a certain humbleness. The following utterances by the participants gave rise to this category:

“I have learnt so much about listening to people and hearing what is important to them. How they see life and make sense of it. How they have the capability, vision power and strength to change their own lives. I have truly learnt to believe in people”.

“...refugee women in a foreign country ... are just people who needs someone to listen to them, accept them as they are and need to be respected thou they are in a foreign country”.

“I have learned that people need to be treated with respect and also given a chance to choose for them to realize who they are and what they need in order for them to be able to change if necessary. I have also learned that people are able to solve their own problems no matter what, we might look at them and think that they can't do anything but Mom and Dad, they do have the power to help themselves they only need to be encouraged, to be helped to stand up. I have also learned that we do not need to do things for this people or to provide them with their needs but that they can find a way, of how they can get, [to address] their needs”.

In the sub-theme presented in the previous discussions focusing on the personal changes experienced by the participants through their social work practical work placement at Bright Site it became evident that the participants' perceptions related to believing in themselves had changed as a result of the social work practical work training at the setting under discussion; they developed a new awareness of their individual selves; they also experienced professional development and their social work practical work exposure afforded them the opportunity to learn from and about others which changed their perceptions of other people.

In the preceding discussion the theme encapsulating the participants' understanding of the Bright Site social work practical work placement setting was presented. In the next section of this report the participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities that emerged as another major theme through the process of data collection, analysis and verification will be presented.

3.3.2 THEME 2: THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF PRACTICAL WORK IN REAL LIFE COMMUNITIES

This theme and its accompanying sub-themes (presented below) were mainly derived from the responses of the participants to the following questions they had to elaborate upon in their letters written to a loved one, or significant other.

What did you learn about your community?

In what way did your community benefit from your involvement with them this year?

Is it really necessary for students to be placed in communities? Please elaborate on your answer.

The responses of the participants to these questions gave rise to this theme which unfolded into the following sub-themes:

Sub-theme 2.1: The type of communities the participants did their social work practical work in

Sub-theme 2.2: The value the participants attached to their learning experiences obtained about and from communities they worked with

Sub-theme 2.3: The participants' perceptions about how communities benefited through their involvement in the communities

Each of the sub-themes related to the theme, "the participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities" will now be presented.

3.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: The type of communities the participants did their social work practical work in

In the context of Bright Site, service-learning opportunities were provided where students engaged with people in real life communities in order to meet the practical requirements stipulated for the BSW degree. The communities where the participants did their case, group and community work, were situated in and adjacent to the Pretoria CBD with Sunnyside being next to the Pretoria CBD. One of the communities however was situated on the outskirts of Pretoria (i.e. Olievenhoutbosch). The fact that communities have to be accessible to the student social workers placed at Bright Site was one of the considerations that guided the practical coordinator (responsible for matching each student with a community). Furthermore, this coordinator had to provide contexts that allowed for practice in a diverse world where "emerging professionals will have to engage in a society in which there are urgent, pressing needs but not enough resources". This according to Rohleder, Swartz, Carolissen, Bozalek and Leibowitz (2008:255) seems to be an appropriate action higher education can take to adequately prepare health and social service students for practice. This context resembles what Unisa's Directorate for Curriculum and Learning Development (DCLD) refers to as "rich Africanised environments for active learning (REALs)" and what is labelled by Louw (2010:50) "an authentic context" in which to learn.

The following excerpt taken from one of the participants' letters points to the types of and the communities the participants engaged in during their social work practical work training: *"some of the options included working with the refugees- there are many living in Sunnyside-, young girls at a place of safety (in Pretoria CBD), homeless people (in Sunnyside) or the community in Olievenhoutbosch ..."*

The second sub-theme that emerged from the theme of "the participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities" was that of "the value the participants attached to their learning experiences obtained about and from communities they worked with". This sub-theme will now be presented.

3.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: The value the participants attached to their learning experiences obtained about and from communities they worked with

From some of the participants' storylines (quoted below) it seems as if their engagement with the real-life bread-and-butter issues of diverse communities provided valuable learning opportunities and enhanced their awareness of the fact that they can learn from and with the people in the community.

"...in the community where I do my practical work, the people battle to find a proper job or a job at all. They have no money to pay for a good education....Being involved with my refugees [women] as a community was a great learning process... I learned about the life of a refugee woman in a foreign country... In turn they taught me how they managed to survive on such little money. Their ingenuity is truly miraculous. Many of the people have erected shacks in their backyard and they rent these out to foreigners for R200-R300 per month in order to make ends meet. When they struggle ... with their money they help each other ... The most important thing I learned from my community is that you need to make the most of what you have... and it costs nothing to be friendly and helpful. The people I have met have so little but they are always willing to offer help or to share...I have seen [the refugee community] on the news, remember when there were xenophobic attacks in 2006? Well it was a big problem. I was petrified when I went in the first time thinking there were going to be gangsters on every corner but I was pleasantly surprised to find cleanly swept yards and friendly and helpful people... Sure, crime is a big problem ... What is important to me may not be important to the community".

"Being in my community as a student helped me to become aware of my own attitudes and values".

This “becoming aware of” one’s own values, of learning from and appreciating the community was facilitated through a participatory approach in that students were sensitised not to see themselves as “experts” in the so-called *development* of communities but to rather have the ability to value and recognise the need to first get to know their communities, learn from them and value the community’s knowledge, wisdom and ways of operating and being as a primary step in facilitating development or change (Swanepoel & de Beer, 2006:52 & 159-161). Relating to this aspect of “becoming aware” or “getting to know” and in order to enhance learning and development, Diale and Fritz (2007:307) suggest that one needs to consider the social capital or assets in the community which include coming to know the everyday practices, culture, and traditions of the community. Fraser (2006:8) emphasises that enhancing our learning is first and foremost acquired from our *interaction* with others rather than merely relying on lectures or study material.

Another sub-theme related to the theme under discussion is that of participants’ perceptions about how communities benefited from their involvement. This will now be presented.

3.3.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: The participants’ perceptions about how communities benefited through their involvement in the communities

The following storylines, taken from the letters the participants wrote, as well as the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, underscore this sub-theme:

“...I was able to with their help and participation develop an income generating project which I think at this stage is sustainable”.

“When I first came into my community they [referring to the people living in the shelter where the participant did her community work] were talking about the management and how the management was supposed to do things for them, but at the end they realised through my facilitation that it’s not about this person or management, it’s about us and what are we doing for ourselves”.

“Through our involvement in the community we have lent them our ears by listening to what they are experiencing in their lives and by sharing with them our experiences as students. We have created the awareness in terms of the different resources they have to their disposal and we too have learnt about the resources available to them”.

“The people at the community are benefitting from me because they are being able to learn about what it is that is holding them back to go on and how they can go on in their lives. The people are very happy to see me as they get a sense of acceptance”.

“they [referring to the community] are now becoming aware of their abilities, strengths and their feelings”.

The participants' experiences of how the community benefited from their involvement correspond with a cohort of students from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Bell's (2007:152) study in which they mentioned that those communities with which they engaged during service-learning benefited and appreciated their involvement with them. How the communities benefited from the participants' involvement (as articulated in the storylines above) gives expression to one of Unisa's mission statements of striving towards “the contribution and the creation of a good and responsive society” (Schenck, 2009:299). The participants' experiences further underscore Unisa's attempt to produce graduates who are equipped to address real life issues in society – including amongst others the sustainable use of resources, tolerance of difference, and the development of indigenous knowledge (Unisa, 2011:2). How the participants managed to progress for the benefit of the community ties in with the Person Centred Approach, which operates from the premise that what we consider to be, or what we think constitutes, a better life or development is to be determined not by the community worker but rather by people themselves or those who will be affected by the development. Within this frame of reference the community worker will facilitate the development of the community's own capacity and ability to mobilise resources in order to improve their quality of life according to their own aspirations (Davids, 2005:17). Van der Westhuizen (2007:346) talks about community learning as part of development and cites Weyers who asserts that community learning would “assist people in recognising their own ability to influence their destiny; it makes them understand that they are able ...to contribute towards a better life style”. This could also be translated into what constitutes the empowerment of a community which refers to the process by which communities or groups or individuals develop the ability to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals therefore maximising the quality of their lives (Adams cited by Collins, 2008:433). This sub-theme and supporting storylines testify to the fact that the participants' involvement benefited these communities in that it provided reciprocal opportunities for learning and development.

In the previous discussion, the theme, “participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities” was presented under related sub-themes. In the discussion to follow, another theme, namely: “participants' reflections on their experiences of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting” will be presented.

3.3.3 THEME 3: PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR EXPERIENCE OF SUPERVISION AT BRIGHT SITE AS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT SETTING

This theme, which unfolded in the sub-themes mentioned below, originated from the responses the participants shared in their letters to their respective loved ones, as well as the information that was shared with the researcher during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the individual participants. These responses were prompted by the following question: "What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary?"

The sub-themes as they unfolded were:

Sub-theme 3.1: The participants' understanding of supervision

Sub-theme 3.2: The participants' experiences of the value of supervision

Sub-theme 3.3: The participants' experiences of the supervisor as a person

The sub-themes mentioned above will now be presented one after the other.

3.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: The participants' understanding of supervision

The following storylines clarify the participants' understanding of supervision:

"Supervision is when we as students are put under certain professional supervisors to guide us on the use of theory in our process when working with people... This is where we meet as a group and talk about what is going on in our communities...She is also the person who marks my reports and helps me to improve my writing skills... with her, and the group's, help we find new ways forward..."

"Supervision is a place where we get support and direction on our practical work. You know the supervisor has travelled this road so many times; she knows what we're going through and is very supportive. This has improved my learning and communication skills a great deal that I have now developed to present my work. I learn from the other members in the supervision group as we share about our practical work experiences".

"[Supervision] is where we [referring to the students] shared in more depth in the group than with the contact person. In the supervision I could get more attention like about 30 minutes spent on my case [social work practical work issues] so that I can understand".

Apart from the fact that the above storylines disclose the participants' understanding of supervision, they also reveal that the supervision (received in a group format) fulfilled educational, supportive and administrative functions which is regarded by Hair and O' Donoghue (2009:71) as traditional supervision functions. Hair and O' Donoghue (2009:76) propose a social constructionist approach, as an alternative framework for social work supervision, and invite supervisors to shape the supervisory relationship in such a way that it will enhance and encourage transparency, collaboration and an exchange of ideas. The accounts of the participants' understanding of supervision quoted above, resembles this approach to supervision referred to by Hair and O' Donoghue. The reason for this is that learning and thus also supervision, at Bright Site, are constructed within the postmodern, social construction and person-centred paradigm where learning practices would recognise a world of multiple realities (Grobler, Schenck and du Toit, 2003:44). This correlates with Van Dyk and Harrison's (2008:14-15) constructionist assumption underpinning postmodern supervision. In postmodern supervision the focus on the expertise of the supervisor is not embedded in the first instance in her subject specific knowledge but rather in her ability to facilitate interaction in order for the supervisee to create meaning and understanding. Supervision then provides the context for developing alternative meanings and for the co-evolving of new meanings so as to develop, learning and change.

The second sub-theme that emerged from participants' reflections on their experience of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting was the value they attached to this supervision. This sub-theme will be presented now.

3.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: The participants' experiences of the value of supervision

The following excerpts taken from three individual interviews and three letters capture the participants' experiences of the value of supervision.

Table 3.9: Storylines capturing some of the participants' experiences of the value of supervision

<p>Storylines from Three Letters</p>	<p><i>"I find these [referring to the supervision meetings] most helpful. It is also during these supervision meetings that I realised how controlling I am... I definitely am starting to feel more confident and I think her [referring to the supervisor], and the other students', support has helped with that. We actually all support each other because sometimes it can be really tough... Meeting in this group helps you to not feel so alone in your struggle".</i></p> <p><i>"Supervision is helpful because after writing our reports we get</i></p>
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	<p><i>clarification on how to apply the theory and skills and how to use techniques in our cases, group and communities”.</i></p> <p><i>“Supervision is a place where we get support and direction on our practical work. You know the supervisor has travelled this road so many times; she knows what we’re going through and is very supportive. This has improved my learning and communication skills a great deal that I have now developed to present my work. I learn from the other members in the supervision group as we share about our practical work experiences”.</i></p>
<p>Storylines from Three Individual Interviews</p>	<p><i>“Supervision is very important because you get first-hand evaluation on what you were doing in your community. You can also not go back to the community without supervision because you won’t know what you must do differently. So supervision helps you to understand if you planned something and it didn’t work, why it didn’t work and it helps you also to self-evaluate”.</i></p> <p><i>“The one-on-one sessions I had with the supervisor that moulded me into a snow woman, and that encouraged me, and helped me to overcome some of the difficulties that I have experienced in my practical work”.</i></p> <p><i>“The supervision helped me a lot with my practical... I think I would have even now would be lost if there was no supervision because I would not know what to do because supervision was more eye opening... I think the ... the supervision gives you the confidence to implement what you have learned... She ... helped us how to approach the people ... the feedback that she gave us built me in a way ...”</i></p>

From the quotations presented above the researcher concluded that supervision experiences were valuable to the participants as they provided the context for developing alternative meanings and for the co-evolving of new meanings so as to develop, learn and change (Van Dyk & Harrison, 2008:14). These experiences resonate with Collins et al. (2010:973) whose study underscores the importance of the tutor’s role (which could be related to the role of the supervisor in the study under question) and the value of having regular individual or group tutorials as support system for the social work students in the UK. The supervision at Bright Site was the vehicle through which students received continuous feedback and in this regard Brown and Knight (1994:108-114) assert that constructive feedback forms a crucial part of the learning process.

The ensuing discussion will reflect on the participants' experiences of the supervisor as person as third sub-theme emerging from participants' reflection on their experience of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting.

3.3.3.3 Sub-theme 3.3: The participants' experiences of the supervisor as a person

From the participants' verbal accounts the researcher deduced that they had experienced their supervisors as positive and regarded them as being supportive, gentle, caring and helpful. The following quotations are provided in support of this sub-theme:

"And our supervisor, I would say she was very amazing because she believed in us. Firstly, though we doubted ourselves like in the process of this community work; are we going to make it? But I've learned a lot through her that she allowed us to be our own self in our communities because she didn't compare us; she just allow us to be us and she is a very supporting person because you can tell her whatever problem you are facing and she believe in us saying "Don't worry you'll make it..."

"We are grateful to our supervisors C and S for their support and nurturing during the supervision sessions. They have moulded us into becoming aware of ourselves and aware of the people we work with in the community... We have an experienced social worker that supervises us ... She is kind, gentle and caring and helps us to see our mistakes... She doesn't only point out our mistakes but also acknowledges when we do things well".

"... My supervisor ... listens and also is always there to help when I have a problem with my work..."

The preceding storylines also testify to the fact that the supervisors demonstrated the skill of creating an environment conducive to support and honouring diversity. For Van Dyk and Harrison (2008:1 & 19) a supervisor needs to demonstrate the aforementioned skill. They further note that in such an environment a supervisee is more likely to risk new behaviours and to succeed. Pack (2009:666) concurs and elaborates that the supervisory support provided in supervision should be guided by the same process and elements one would utilise for any other growth fostering relationship, and these include: open and transparent communication, trust, safety, mutuality, having an equal voice, free disclosure and regular timely feedback. Within such a context students could revisit practices they initially regarded as a failure in order to "discover that and view their practice more confidently and positively than what they thought possible" (Pack 2009:659).

In the previous discussion the participants' reflections on their experiences of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting were unpacked in terms of their understanding of supervision, the value they attached to the experience of supervision and their experiences of the supervisor as person.

In the ensuing discussion the challenges experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site will be discussed.

3.3.4 THEME 4: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS DURING THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT BRIGHT SITE

This theme was born out of the references to the challenges the participants articulated in their letters to their loved ones and was further explored during the focus group discussion as well as during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In view of the fact that the challenges experienced related to insufficient funds, lack of personal safety, challenges related to working in groups, and a high workload, the researcher, independent coder and supervisor decided at the consensus discussion to present these as sub-themes under this theme.

In the discussion below the following sub-themes will be presented:

Sub-theme 4.1: Insufficient funds experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Sub-theme 4.2: A lack of personal safety experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Sub-theme 4.3: Working in groups at times experienced as a challenge by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Sub-theme 4.4: High workload as a challenge experienced by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

The sub-themes mentioned above will now be presented one after the other:

3.3.4.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Insufficient funds experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

The difficulties the participants experienced regarding insufficient funds seem to mirror the poverty situation of South Africa and also that of the Unisa student population. Pieterse

(2001:32) asserts that 40% to 50% of the South African population could already be regarded as poor, with Schenck (2009:305-306) concluding that the Unisa students reflect the poverty situation in South Africa. According to Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:7), and with specific reference to the South African context, more and more school leavers who are also younger and unemployed are entering distance education, mostly looking for an affordable learning option. The following storylines taken from the transcripts of the focus group discussion and two of the face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews reflect these challenges of insufficient funding:

“Unexpected costs (like) the cost of copies (were) plus minus R100-R150 per week as well as (added) transport money”.

“I can say ... most of us were struggling with finances...especially money to come to the organisation and to come and go to groups and communities”.

“...transport to come here [referring to the organisation] is the one thing that also put strain on us... You know you need to pay X amount for your studies per year but there are so many extras that one does not know about beforehand; photocopying, transport to go out to the community, coming here I would say finance [referring to the hidden costs of the fourth year] is, a difficult thing”.

The lack of personal safety was also experienced as a challenge by participants during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site and will be discussed in the following sub-section.

3.3.4.2 Sub-theme 4.2: A lack of personal safety experienced as a challenge by the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

During the course of their social work practical work participants experienced that their personal safety was at times at risk. The participants' concern for their personal safety were echoed in the study of Kosny and Eakin (2008:149-150) about the working conditions in non-profit organisations in Canada. Although the Bright Site is not a registered non-profit organisation but a service-learning institution, the circumstances in which participants conducted their social work practical work training were similar to those of the organisations in the study mentioned above where services are rendered to marginalised communities and at no financial cost. Kosny and Eakin (2008:149-150) found that these workers are often exposed to circumstances deleterious to their health and safety by being exposed to violence and infectious disease. The participants' concerns about their safety or lack of safety are

encapsulated in the following quotations taken from one of the letters written by two participants¹⁷ and from four of the individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews:

“Our safety (is of concern) when going to our communities”.

“[it was] a traumatic experience when they burgled the place [referring to a shelter erected by home-based care givers from where they rendered their services to the community. This was also the meeting place for the student doing her community work with the caregivers of that specific community] twice and the second time one of the care-givers was raped she was very, very brutally assaulted and she was hospitalised for quite a long period. It [referring to going back to the community and continuing with the practical work] was difficult in the beginning...”

“The challenges that I am referring to are like safety, because some of the students felt they are not safe working with the refugees ...”

“... Like our, community, was not safe for us because you’re working with refugees and I had to go in town to look for them. At times it was not safe”.

“...Students not being safe especially for those who are working with the homeless people in Sunnyside...”

Working in groups was at times experienced as a further challenge by the participants at the social work practical work placement at Bright Site and will now be discussed.

3.3.4.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Working in groups at times experienced as a challenge by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

While the participants expressed their experiences of working in groups as “constructive” and “supportive” in relation to executing organisational duties at Bright Site (see Category 1.3.2) as well as in relation to the value of supervision (see Sub-theme 3.2), the participants also expressed their frustration at having to work in groups.

The following quotations capture their frustrations in this regard:

In a SWOT analysis, reflecting on the social work practical work experience at Bright Site, one of the brainstorming groups¹⁸ during the focus group discussion identified “*conflicts amongst students*” as a weakness in practical work placement.

¹⁷ The participants worked (wrote letters) in five groups comprising two or three each.

“... working in a group had its own ups and downs especially when we had to start to form our three different groups that we had in the organisation: the work with the children of refugee mothers, marketing and data base,... some of the students will give excuses not to come for their practical work; like you find the team working with the refugee mothers is not here the whole six months but at the end they have the opportunity to also pass... you are aware that there are hard workers, who will always represent others, they will always find out information for others but others will just sit back and wait for other students to give them information”.

Although within the context of group supervision, but also relevant to the above experiences of students working in groups, Todd and Strom (1997:323) draw supervisors' attention to the fact that less competent members in a group tend to defer to the more competent and experienced members and further warn that group members can split into subgroups based on these perceived competency levels. Zastrow (2010:197) further notes, as also depicted in the above quotations from participants, that conflict in groups will in all likelihood arise due to differences in interests, beliefs, values and personal goals.

The fourth sub-theme that emerged as a challenge to participants in relation to their social work practical work placement at Bright Site was that of a high workload and this will be discussed next.

3.3.4.4 Sub-theme 4.4: High workload as a challenge experienced by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

In an attempt to underscore this sub-theme a table is provided below depicting the high workload as a challenge experienced by the participants during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site:

Table 3.10: Storylines from participants pointing to the high workload as a challenge experienced by students during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Storylines from Three Letters	<p><i>“We are under a lot of pressure because our subjects require a lot of work...Organisational work requires [too much] time and we neglect our books”.</i></p> <p><i>“... my studies are keeping me very busy... I don't socialize</i></p>
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¹⁸ During the focus group discussion the eighteen participants divided themselves into three smaller “brainstorming groups” consisting of three but not more than four participants each.

	<p><i>anymore. Don't go to church as often as I use to. I don't attend any church meetings. I don't go out on our once a month dinner outings like we use to do. I don't cook my favourite pasta dishes anymore. I don't fulfil my motherly /daughterly obligations".</i></p> <p><i>"...my year has been quiet hectic. Being committed and doing what it takes is one thing, I've discovered how difficult it can be at times to get all the work done, in time. Even with time management it doesn't seem like there's ever enough time".</i></p>
<p>Storylines from Two of the Individual Interviews</p>	<p><i>"... it was a challenge for me this year. I had to spend a lot of time doing my books and neglected other things... When I reviewed the work it was truly overwhelming... and also looking at the days that I was expected to come here, I couldn't afford it, at times it was hard but I did manage to do that until now".</i></p> <p><i>"... It was very hard for me... Here at Bright Site you don't sleep. I [often] used to go and sleep at twelve and wake up at three in the mornings".</i></p>

The challenge related to the high workload experienced by the participants during their social work practical work training resonates with the literature where the research findings of O'Connor and Cordova (2010:363) on the experiences of adults who work full-time while attending graduate school part-time, indicated that "world events, demanding jobs, and demanding schoolwork all compet[e] for their (participants') time and energies". The participants who took part in the study of Collins et al (2010:967) relating to the stress, support and wellbeing of the social work students in the United Kingdom also indicated the following stress factors as part of their social work studies: the demand to be successful, regular attendance of course-related activities and dovetailing academic learning demands with those related to the course structure. This experience of social work studies as being very demanding with a high workload further dovetails with studies in the United States of America and Canada with similar findings (Collins et al., 2010:972). Within the Unisa context the final-year student social workers who participated in Lintvelt's (2008:82) study were also of the opinion that the workload of the fourth year was too high.

The focus of the previous discussion was on the challenges that participants experienced during their social work practical work training. In the next section of this chapter the support experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical training at Bright Site will be presented.

3.3.5 THEME 5: SUPPORT EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS WHILE ENGAGING IN THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT BRIGHT SITE

The participants' accounts of the support they experienced while engaging in their social work practical work at Bright Site emerged from the following question they had to answer in their letter to meaningful others in their lives: "Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?"

From their responses to these questions the researcher and the independent coder noticed sources of support *outside* the Bright Site context and sources of support *inside* Bright Site and decided to present this theme as two sub-themes as indicated below:

Sub-theme 5.1: External sources of support experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site
Sub-theme 5.2: Internal sources of support from the Bright Site as experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training

Each of the identified sub-themes will be discussed separately in the discussion to follow.

3.3.5.1 Sub-theme 5.1: External sources of support experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site

The external sources of support refer to those people outside the participants' learning environment who provided support during the course of their social work practical work training. In this regard family and friends were mentioned throughout all the phases of data collection as external source of support and the following storylines provided in the table below underscore these:

Table 3.11: Quotations from the participants depicting friends and family as external sources of support whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Storylines from Letters	<p><i>"Mum and Dad, brothers and sisters we would like to thank you for doing your best in the support that you give us. All the time when we face challenges we remember your words of encouragement for us to be strong..."</i></p> <p><i>"Mother without your support I would not have been able to do this. Thank you for always being there and for listening to me."</i></p>
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	<p><i>Thank you for doing all the cooking and for attending to the house chores and to my children and for making sure that everything is in place... Thank you to my friends P and C who are always willing to assist with the Sunday meals when Mum doesn't feel so well".</i></p> <p><i>"My family ... has also been very supportive. They encouraged me especially when I feel like it's all too much and I can't cope with my studies. As much as my ground has been unsteady at times, the family has always been there to keep me steady and on my feet".</i></p>
<p>Storylines from the Focus Group Discussion</p>	<p><i>"We had great support from friends and family. Friends and family back you up they saw that you have potential and determination".</i></p>
<p>Storylines from the Individual Interviews</p>	<p><i>"...at some stage I told my younger brother that I was going to deregister...and he said that if you want to settle for second best then you must go for it, but I know that you're not stupid, if you were stupid, you wouldn't be here. So, whatever decision you make, it's your choice. So I decided too that I will continue. I'm not a quitter".</i></p> <p><i>"In spite of the difficulties, I was staying with my Aunt and she is a very supporting person and she always encouraged me to learn, because she is also still a student but also working, I could see how she is struggling, but she keeps it up by still studying not giving up and then every time when I see her I just want to be that strong person like her".</i></p>

The participants' experiences of family and friends as a strong support system closely relate to Wade's (2009:471) findings, although she focused on the topic of "Unisa Social Work students' experiences of trauma", where she found that family and friends were largely identified by participants as the most common sources of help, in dealing with emotional distress.

The internal sources of support that emerged from this theme will now become the focus of attention.

3.3.5.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Internal sources of support from Bright Site as experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training

As encapsulated in the words of two participants, students seem to experience the Bright Site as supportive with general statements in this regard as follows:

“For me I feel that Bright Site has done a lot. It’s not like other organisations. The support that is here you don’t find it at other organisations”.

“I got every support that I needed here from ... I would say the staff as a whole”.

Six specific internal sources of support were further identified as the sources within the Bright Site and the Department of Social Work at Unisa and will be presented under the following categories:

Category 5.2.1: The supervisors as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Category 5.2.2: The contact person as internal source of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Category 5.2.3: The lecturers as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Category 5.2.4: Fellow students as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Category 5.2.5: The administrative facilities and secretary as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Category 5.2.6: Counselling received as internal source of support for the students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

In the ensuing discussion the first three categories (Category 5.2.1 - Category 5.2.3) will be presented in table form while the last three categories (Category 5.2.4 - Category 5.2.6) will be discussed separately, one after the other.

In Table 3.12, below, the utterances made by the participants verbally and in writing will be presented to illustrate the support the participants experienced from the supervisors, contact person and lecturers as internal sources of support

Table 3.12: Storylines from the participants' accounts pointing to the support experienced from supervisors, the contact person and lecturers (as internal sources of support) during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

(i) Category 5.2.1: The supervisors as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site (This category is linked to Sub-theme 3.2:- Students' experience of the value of supervision and Sub-theme 3.3: Students' experience of the supervisor as person, and must be read in conjunction with the mentioned sub-themes.)

The quotations (below) taken from two letters written by the participants refer to the supervisors as being internal sources of support to the participants during their social work practical work training at the Bright Site:

"our supervisors are very supportive because they give us guidance on the process of our practical work modules".

[we thank our] "supervisors C and S for their support and nurturing during the supervision sessions. They have moulded us into becoming aware of ourselves and aware of the people we work with in the community".

Although indirectly referring to supervisors, Lintvelt's (2008:79 & 80) study expressed that undergraduate student social workers' feedback on the academic staff (including supervisors) at the Department of Social Work, Unisa, was in general favourable with supervisors being accessible and available.

(ii) Category 5.2.2: The contact person as internal source of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site (This category ties in with Sub-category 1.3.5.2: Experiences relating to the meetings with the contact person at the Bright Site and must be read in conjunction with the mentioned sub-theme.)

The support the participants experienced from the contact person at the Bright Site was noted in one of the letters drafted by two participants to their loved ones and from an account shared by one participant during one of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. These are presented here:

"...we have a contact person...she is amazing, since January she has been very supportive meaning she helped us throughout our block placements to ease our anxieties and she

introduced us to our communities and she also helped us with cases and gave us guidelines for group work”.

“... our contact person was full-time with us. She was our gatekeeper ... she introduced us to our community for which we were very grateful and she listened to every problem that we were facing day-to-day. She will even ask us “Are you fine? How are you feeling for today? Will you manage? How’s your personal life? What’s going on?” And she also created a space where you’re allowed to talk about everything”.

These storylines of participants resonate with Lawlor’s (2008:47) emphasis on the importance of the role of the Unisa contact person as pivotal partner in creating opportunities for growth and professional development of the 4th year Unisa student social worker.

(iii) Category 5.2.3: The lecturers as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

(This category links with Category 1.4.1: The participants’ perception of having more contact with lecturers as an advantage of their placement at the Bright Site and must be read in conjunction with that category.)

The following quotations speak of the lecturers as internal source of support:

“Without the academic staff that so understands when we submit assignments late, this journey thus far would not have been possible”.

“You are in contact with the lecturers. So you, sort-of... are no longer intimidated when you see them. So unlike other students they tell us they would be intimidated”.

“...we work hand-in-hand with our lecturers...”

The participants’ experiences (in this study) dovetailed with those of Lintvelt’s (2008:80) study where the undergraduate student social workers at Unisa thought that “the Department of Social Work at Unisa is the one department where lecturers go out of their way to assist students when they need help”.

In the Table above utterances made by the participants were quoted to illustrate the support the participants experienced from the supervisors, contact person and lecturers (as internal sources of support) during their social work practical work training. In the discussion to follow, fellow students, administrative facilities, the secretary and the counselling received will be introduced and discussed as the other identified internal sources of support.

(iv) Category 5.2.4: Fellow students as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

Working in groups with peers or fellow students, whether that entailed the students' organisational work, supervision groups, or small group discussions during training sessions, formed an integral part of the participants' social work practical work experience at Bright Site. During the participants' social work practical work placement they appeared to value their peers at Bright Site as supportive. The participants' experiences were very similar to the social work students in the study of Collins et al. (2010:973) who highlighted the significance of support by fellow students during the course of their studies. Echoing this experience, O'Connor and Cordova's (2010:364) participants (in the study focusing on the experiences of adults who work full time whilst studying part time) also value peer group projects as beneficial for learning and encouragement. Zastrow (2010:196) notes that cooperative groups increase, as also reflected in the participants' responses below, "emotional involvement in group accomplishment, helping and sharing, interpersonal skills and cooperative attitudes and values". The following storylines from one of the letters written by two students and three of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews depict the participants' experiences of their peers as supportive and as an internal source of support:

"I am so grateful for the support I have received from fellow students... They are always willing to support and to lend an ear when I don't seem to cope with my studies and to help me with assignments when I am stuck".

"... support from the students here [referring to the peers at Bright Site]. We found that we share experiences when we are here and you feel that I'm not alone and other people are also experiencing some problems and they are dealing with them so why should I keep myself blocked-up? So, yes, the support that I had from the students here really helped a lot and the fact that we are placed with as many students here is also a booster for us because you can relate to other people's experiences".

"...and the support again amongst all the students was very great because then we talk to each other you tend to find that I'm not going through this alone. And besides talking about our assignments, we could also talk on a very personal level, like about our financial crises, our tuition fees for school and how we can survive all that... I can say that the students were supportive because besides us talking about the studies ... we could also talk about I don't have food today, what are we eating? Then you'll find that sometimes we'll mix certain amount of money for us to get something to eat. When we are emotional about stuff, we were also able to sit down and discuss that".

“...and the interaction with the other students it is very good if you can talk to other students in terms of the work you have been doing, we give advice to one another, where we guide one another and we support each other”.

In the ensuing section the category, namely: the administrative facilities and secretary as internal sources of support for the participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site, will become the focus of discussion.

(v) Category 5.2.5: The administrative facilities and secretary as internal sources of support for students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

During their social work practical work training at Bright Site the participants at regular intervals made reference to the fact that they received valuable administrative support at this placement setting specifically from the secretary at the centre. Storylines underscoring the support experienced from the secretary (as internal source of support) are the following:

“...the secretary at Bright Site, C, always makes sure that there is enough photocopy paper for us to print our reports and signs our logbooks and practical work forms for the week and always has a friendly word to say to us... She also treats/spoils us with nice cupcakes on special occasions at Bright Site”.

“... our secretary, I would say she gave us support especially when it came to administration. She was always there when we needed to fax, when we had an emergency to make phone calls to our lecturer, she was very helpful and we could also leave messages with her... The students we've got a computer room, we are allowed to fax, and we are allowed to print.”

The counselling received as internal source of support for the participants during their social work practical work training will now be presented as the last category related to the sub-theme under discussion.

(vi) Category 5.2.6: Counselling received as internal source of support for the students during their social work practical work training at Bright Site

The Bright Site made counselling services (offered by counsellors that were allocated to Bright Site) available to the students enrolled for their social work practical work training at this setting. The reason behind the counselling service for students took the ODL context into consideration as well as the effect practical placements could have on the students. Within the ODL context Louw (2010:48) argues that students studying at an open and distance learning environment often feel their voices are not being heard. Initially at the beginning of

their learning process they feel alienated on many levels. Looking then further at the effect of being confronted (often for the first time) with real life problems in a real life world, Pack (2009:662) talks about (although within the context of supervision, but relevant to this discussion) the buffering effect of supervision which enables the supervisee to engage with traumatic material, and enables them to maintain personal wellbeing and resilience despite various challenges and obstacles encountered. In addition, a study conducted by Lawlor (2008:106) also indicated a need amongst fourth-year student social workers at Unisa for counselling services in order to either “deal with their own issues or to experience counselling in the role of the client”. Wade’s (2009:501) study confirms this need for professional help (counselling) amongst fourth-year student social workers at Unisa but indicates that they have limited access to such services. Within the context of Bright Site the counsellor was not responsible for supervision but worked closely with the supervisors and the contact person of the organisation where they in negotiation with the relevant students would identify students in need of counselling. Students could also initiate the counselling by approaching a counsellor directly. The supportive value the participants attached to the counselling services received by the some of the participants is reflected in the following quotations:

“... she [referring to the counsellor from Bright Site] made me believe in myself”.

“Well, there was a point where I broke down. It was ... like... I felt like I was alone, I had no support. And the thing that made me cope was the counselling sessions that I had...the support that I had from ...the counselling sessions really helped a lot”.

To wrap up: In the previous section the external and internal sources of support referred to by the participants during the various phases of data collection were identified as sub-themes and categories (where applicable). These sub-themes and related categories were underscored and illustrated through direct quotations from the transcribed letters and interviews and where possible supported by confirming literature. Family and friends were mentioned as external sources of support. Internally, the supervisors, the contact person, lecturers, fellow students, the administrative facilities and the secretary, and the counselling received were indicated as sources of support.

In the next section of this chapter, the last and sixth major theme that emerged from the process of data collection, analysis and verification will be presented. This theme relates to suggestions from participants on aspects of the social work practical training that must remain unchanged, suggestions related to the selection criteria for fourth-level students to be placed for their social work practical work placement at the Bright Site and suggestions on how to manage the challenges experienced during the social work practical training at this setting.

3.3.6 THEME 6: SUGGESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS RELATING TO (1) ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL PLACEMENT SETTING AND TRAINING THAT MUST REMAIN UNCHANGED, (2) THE SELECTION CRITERIA FOR FOURTH-LEVEL STUDENTS TO BE PLACED FOR THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT AT BRIGHT SITE, AND (3) HOW TO MANAGE THE CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED DURING THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL TRAINING AT THIS SETTING

This theme came into being as result of the following questions during the three phases of data collection:

- “Being concerned about your safety came to the fore as another theme, especially when entering the field to do your social work practical work (i.e. many of you entered into and had to work in volatile dangerous communities and were scared, but also managed to keep yourself safe) ...From your experiences gained in this regard what advice would you forward to future students to keep themselves safe? Or to put it differently, what do they need to know and do to keep themselves safe?” (This question was put to the participants during the focus group discussion.)
- “...Looking at your practical work at Bright Site, what was for you the most beneficial? What would you keep the same?” If you look at that total package, which do you think contributed the most to your personal and professional development?” (This question was put to the participants during the focus group discussion as well as the face-to-face semi-structured interviews.)
- “What does a student need to have in order to ‘survive’ a practical placement at the Site?” (This question was posed to the participants with whom the researcher had face-to-face semi-structured interviews.)
- “If you were the practical coordinator responsible for the 4th year practical training of student social workers at the Bright Site: What selection criteria (type of student that will best fit with the Bright Site) will you use to place students at the Bright Site? How will you go about addressing the typical stumbling blocks experienced by students doing their practical work at Bright Site? What aspects of the practical placement will you keep the same?” (These questions were posed to the participants with whom the researcher had face-to-face semi-structured interviews.)
- “You also mentioned various challenges you had to face this year (financial, safety issues, fear, insecurity, high work load etc.) If you could guide new students on how to cope with these difficulties, what specific guidance would you give them?” (This question was put to the participants during the focus group discussion.)

Based on the responses provided by the participants, the researcher and independent coder decided to present this theme under the following sub-themes:

Sub-theme 6.1: Participants' suggestions on aspects of the social work practical work placement setting and training at Bright Site that should remain unchanged

Sub-theme 6.2: Participants' suggestions on the selection criteria to be used for fourth level student social workers to be placed at Bright Site

Sub-theme 6.3: Participants' suggestions on how to deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

Each of these sub-themes will be discussed separately.

3.3.6.1 Sub-theme 6.1: Participants' suggestions on aspects of the social work practical work placement setting and training at Bright Site that should remain unchanged

The responses to the following questions posed to the participants during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews gave rise to the mentioned sub-theme: "Looking at your practical work at Bright Site, what was for you the most beneficial? What would you keep the same? If you look at that total package, which do you think contributed the most to your personal and professional development?"

From the quotations provided below an idea is formed about the suggested aspects that should remain unchanged in relation to the social work practical work placement setting and training at Bright Site.

"The organisation itself worked, it really worked because it cared about the students; it worked because we could reach out towards the lecturers when we were going to do our assignments; it worked because amongst each other the students will help or give each other guidance; ...; it helped because we get exposure, ... we grow as students and we learned a lot".

"I'd say all of them [referring to the organisational work, the training, the supervision, the practical case, group and community work], they're connected. Because with practical work you also need training and with marketing you need to do networking, it's what we do in community development. And then you also have to have contacts with other organisations so if you do not know their contacts then you find that maybe they would not refer people to you or you refer people to them. So if you miss training

[referring to Friday morning training] *you'd have a problem with your practical work, because with training you do it practically which is not there in the books*".

"Ok what I will keep the same is the Friday training".

"...everything went the way you wanted it, nothing to change".

The next sub-theme that unfolded concerned suggestions on selection criteria to be used for 4th year student social workers for placement at the Bright Site and will be subsequently discussed.

3.3.6.2 Sub-theme 6.2: Participants' suggestions on the selection criteria to be used for fourth level student social workers to be placed at Bright Site

Different opinions emerged as suggestions for selection criteria to be used for the placement of fourth-year student social workers at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting. Some participants suggested clear selection criteria in terms of a student's ability to geographically access the Service-learning Centre, whether a student is working full-time or not with a further suggestion that a student needs to have a strong academic record in order to be placed at Bright Site. Other students did not emphasise the issue of having selection criteria but rather asked for students' commitment to their studies. Storylines taken from the accounts of four participants depict their suggestions regarding the relevant selection criteria to be used for the placement of fourth-year students at Bright Site.

"Bright Site should only accommodate full-time students because those who are working are left behind and some tasks they are unable to obtain because of their responsibilities...I think the students who are staying around town ... because most of the students complain about transport money yes if you can stay around town you can walk to here everyday...I think any type of student can fit here".

"... look at their academic record before placing them. If you see that student was getting fifty percent for all the subjects from first level ... that student should rather not be placed at Bright Site.... a Bright Site student you should be responsible first. A student from Bright Site should not go jollyng [socialising] from Monday to Friday. You need to be responsible you need to know your stuff [theory and application thereof] and you need to be a hard worker".

"You need to look at the commitment of students ... So you have to have determination and you have to be committed".

“I wouldn’t select people... whoever is willing to come here at Bright Site to do their practical work would be welcome”.

In the next section the suggestions from the participants on how to deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement at the Bright Site will be presented.

3.3.6.3 Sub-theme 6.3: Participants’ suggestions on how to deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site

The participants’ suggestions on how to deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement at Bright Site unfolded into four categories. These suggestions should be read in conjunction with theme four presented earlier which dealt with challenges experienced by the participants. The categories are:

<p>Category 6.3.1: Participants’ suggestions on how to deal with the hidden costs of the social work practical work training</p>
<p>Category 6.3.2: Participants’ suggestions on how the high workload and time should be managed during the social work practical work training at Bright Site</p>
<p>Category 6.3.3: Participants’ suggestions on how the safety issues in relation to their social work practical work training should be addressed</p>
<p>Category 6.3.4: Participants’ suggestions on increased extra training needed in relation to the social work practical work</p>

Each of these categories will be discussed separately.

(i) Category 6.3.1: Participants’ suggestions on how to deal with the hidden costs of the social work practical work training

The participants’ suggestions on how to deal with the hidden costs of the social work practical work training included actions that Bright Site as organisation can take and those students can undertake to address the issue of hidden costs. The participants recommended that Bright Site set aside funding to assist students financially and make students more aware of the estimated and hidden costs attached to the practical work. Suggestions on aspects of what students can do are implied and revolve around being honest with family and support for one another. These storylines provided in support of this category are depicted in the Table below:

Table 3.13: Storylines articulating participants’ suggestions on how to deal with the hidden costs included in the social work practical work training

Suggestions on Actions that Bright Site as Organisation can Take to Address the Issue of Hidden Costs.	Suggestions on Actions that Students can Take to Address the Issue of Hidden Costs.
<p><i>“...raising funds for students who are unable to, come here because of finance or...maybe ... make students aware [i.e. of the extra costs that will be incurred as result of their social work practical work training]”.</i></p> <p><i>“... financial assistance for transport money for the round trip from home to Bright Site or to the communities where the students did their group and community work”.</i></p>	<p><i>“We managed to survive that because we were very open and honest about it... [referring to their financial difficulties] you should let the people know that this [referring to where students struggle to survive financially] is going on and I can’t make it to school. Then we were also allowed to call in and say: I can’t make it because of this and this ... students again, we just developed a sense of caring, because you’ll find a extra twenty rand, then I can give it to someone of the students to make it to school for that day. And the other support was that if one cannot make it, we used to make sure that he or she is aware of what happened in the organisation”.</i></p>

How the time was spent on the social work practical work at the Bright Site emerged as a challenge for students and their recommendations on dealing with challenges will be discussed as the next category.

(ii) Category 6.3.2: Participants’ suggestions on how the high workload and time should be managed during the social work practical work training at Bright Site

Students’ recommendations on how the high workload and time should be managed and spent on the social work practical work at Bright Site were also mentioned in terms of what Bright Site as the organisation and the students themselves can do in this regard. In coping with the high workload of the social work practical work at Bright Site the participants’ suggestions to future students revolved around utilising peer group support, effective time management issues as well as realistic choices concerning the number of modules students register for. The storylines testifying to this are depicted in Table 3.14 below.

Table 3.14: Utterances from the participants suggesting how the high workload and time should be managed during the social work practical work training at Bright Site

Suggestions on Actions that Bright Site as Organisation can Take on How to Manage the Students' Time and Workload During their Social Work Practical Work Training	Suggestions on Actions that Students can Take on How to Manage Their Time and Workload During their Social Work Practical Work Training
<p><i>"It is possible, (to organise students' work so that they do not need to come to Bright Site so often but still produce the same quality of work) especially if we are given a day where we know this is the day for practical work. Nobody is supposed to skip it, like Fridays. We all knew that we had to be here. But then also have supervision say after training instead of saying Monday is supervision, Tuesday your meeting with the contact person and then also work with your group for the organisation".</i></p> <p><i>"...rather than spreading it [referring to the organisational work, supervision, Friday trainings and meetings with the contact person] out over the three days, combine it in two days; all the meetings; all the training; all in one day".</i></p>	<p><i>"...Time management can help because as a student you have to know how many times you have to spend at the organisation...register as early as possible and don't take 10 modules at once..."</i></p> <p><i>"Advise them [referring to future students] to plan properly and start assignments early and work consistently due to the workload".</i></p> <p><i>"For high workload, students must...try to form study or peer groups for student support".</i></p>

The participants' suggestions on how the safety issues relevant to their social work practical work should be addressed emerged as another category as the ensuing discussion will depict.

(iii) Category 6.3.3: Participants' suggestions on how the safety issues in relation to their social work practical work training should be addressed

The safety of the participants became apparent as a challenge experienced by them whilst engaging in their social work practical work placement at Bright Site. The participants' suggestions resonated with what the literature provided on measures for social workers to keep themselves safe. Smith (2006:69-70) argues for what he calls the cultivation of an appropriate "fearfulness" in social workers where they should develop the ability to

acknowledge and recognise safety issues they could be confronted with. The participants suggested that Bright Site could assist by better screening communities as well as listening to students when they expressed their concerns about safety issues, or a lack of safety experienced in a certain community or contexts. These suggestions were articulated along the following lines presented in the Table below:

Table 3.15: Participants’ utterances suggesting how the safety issues in relation to their social work practical work training should be addressed

Students’ suggestions on how Bright Site as organisation could address their safety concerns

“I would allocate them to organisations where I know that they would find the community that they would be safe.”

“ I think if you can listen to the students, not necessarily agree with what they are saying, but try to understand them and hear what they are experiencing it could help to ease things for them”.

In this context the participants referred to a range of feelings of being unsafe but which are not always easy to verbalise. These feelings resonate with what Zastrow (2003:330) call the “gut-feeling” of a social worker. He notes the necessity for social workers to listen to their “gut-feelings” in keeping themselves safe. He argues that social workers need to be attentive to the gestures, body language and verbal expressions of their clients and acknowledge that also relating to safety issues, different meanings are attached to different cultures. Zastrow’s reference to the ‘gut-feeling’ is relevant to, and reflected in the participants implied message that as Bright Site management we need to listen to and try to understand these sometimes unvoiced feelings amongst students regarding their safety.

Students’ advice to other students on how to keep themselves safe

“I didn’t go there alone. If we had to visit the people where they live I went with my fellow student... we made sure that we did not drink or eat anything that the men gave us. And with Pretoria, because I grew up here, I know a lot of stuff when people want to do something to you so I was always watching out for those things...And we went there during daytime so by four o’ clock we finished and ... made sure that by that time we went home... I also told someone at home that if I do not contact you by this time, find a way to contact me”.

“For safety, working in pairs is better than one. Dress appropriately e.g. you don’t overdress. Put cell phones where no one can see it. Tell someone where you are going during the day. Don’t reveal too much personal information e.g. your car, how much you have. Avoid going to the community late at night. Avoid being in isolated areas especially if your community members consist of men only”. (These suggestions were forwarded by two of the participants

who worked with refugee men.)

"...if you (referring to Bright Site Management) can send students to communities in groups of two even if we were three students and we go in different directions but ...meet each other at a certain time and if one is not back ... the others can look for that person... [After a burglary and rape incident in the community] the group could speak about it, we talked about it and I could ask them how did they feel about this how did it affect them. What encouraged me was that the group said we cannot give up, if we give up now, because they were also care givers, what will happen to the broader community and then I also thought but if they go on then I should too and what will happen to the goal they have set and what will happen to my group? If they can continue what is wrong with me, together we can overcome this thing".

In response to social workers safeguarding themselves in the workplace, Zastrow (2003:333) also suggests that should a visit have to take place at a client's home (also in the community) being accompanied by another worker is advisable.

The participants' suggestions on increased extra training emerged as another category under the sub-theme focusing on participants' suggestions on how to deal with challenges experienced during their social work practical work placement and will be addressed in the following section.

(iv) Category 6.3.4: Participants' suggestions on increased extra training needed in relation to the social work practical work

The participants expressed the need for extra training on issues relevant to statutory work, computer literacy as well as report writing skills. They further suggested that more time be spent on such training. For the academic year relevant to this study (2010) two hours every Friday were set aside by the organisation for training purposes. The training took the form of discussion groups linked to the curriculum outcomes of the fourth-year social work practical work training. This need expressed by students can be explained within the context of Schenck's (2009:300) reference to the low throughput rate of Unisa due to unpreparedness of students coming from a disadvantaged secondary school system. She also mentions Unisa's support for initiatives to improve integration and support of students. With reference to the need for computer training Heydenrych (2007:39) talks about the digital divide between the "information rich and information poor" where people in developing countries are often marginalised from the benefits of new communication technologies. He argues for the need for these technologies to be included in the teaching and learning process. The need for computer literacy was also expressed by the participants (fourth-year student social workers at Unisa) in Lawlor's (2008:106) study. The participants' suggestions on increased extra

training relevant to the social work practical work at the Bright Site are encapsulated in the following storylines:

“Extra training could include: How to work in a more creative ways. More statutory work/training and more comprehensive computer training...”

“Computer literacy course should include doing presentation using Power Point and Excel for budgeting”.

“...So as opposed to having training just once a week to try and make it twice a week. We used to come together from 09:00-11:00 but in those two hours the time was not enough... writing reports although there is steps in the tutorials I must be honest I still do not [know how]... I can do something but I cannot always put it in writing and express myself on how I have done things or come to where I am... maybe have a session saying this is what is expected from you when you write a report and this is the things that you really need to focus on”.

In the previous discussion suggestions were forwarded by the participants relating to (1) aspects of the social work practical placement setting and training that must remain unchanged, (2) the selection criteria for fourth-level students to be placed for their social work practical work at the Bright Site, and (3) how to manage the challenges experienced during the social work practical training at this setting.

3.4 CONCLUSION OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter the researcher presented the research findings. The researcher first provided the demographic data of participants (i.e. the fourth-year student social workers who did their social work practical training at a Service-learning Centre of an ODL university). An overview of the six themes with related sub-themes, categories and where applicable the sub-categories which emerged during the data analysis processes were presented. The first theme centred on the participants' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting. In the second theme the focus was on the participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities. The participants' reflections on their experiences related to supervision were discussed as theme three. The challenges experienced by participants during their social work practical work training and sources of support assisting them while engaging in their social work practical work were presented in themes four and five, respectively. In theme six, the participants' suggestions to Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting and advice to prospective future students were provided. These themes, with their accompanying sub-themes, categories, sub-categories

(where applicable) were substantiated, illuminated and underscored by confirming storylines from the transcribed data source and where possible subjected to a literature control.

The following chapter will further present the conclusions and recommendations in relation to the research findings as well as the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

“During the Lebanese Civil War, a story goes; a visiting American was stopped by masked gunmen. One wrong word could cost him his life. ‘Are you a Christian or a Moslem?’ they asked. I am a tourist, he cried” (Zukav, 1979:286).

For Zukav (1979:286) “the way we pose our questions often illusorily limits our responses”. The way we think, phrase our thoughts and articulate them [as illustrated in the quotation from Zukav above] limits us to a perspective of either/or”. He argues that “experience itself is never so limited. There is always an alternative between every ‘this’ and every ‘that’”.

These introductory remarks provide a fitting metaphor depicting the researcher’s understanding of and sensitivity to the process of discovering and exploring the multiple *truths* present in the world within and around us. Qualitative research affords opportunities and provides space for inventing and exercising the fine art and craftsmanship of discovering that which goes beyond the illusionary borders of “*either/or*” to a discovery that embraces the “*both*” and “*the and*”, of the unexpected, the surprising, the ambiguous, as well as that which is still unknown in our lived existence and experiences (cf. Green & Thorogood, 2009:15; Freedman & Combs, 1996:28-29, 33; Monette et al., 2008:224; Creswell, 2009:192; Irvin, 1999:38; and Barroso, 2010:117). Qualitative research has the potential to enforce dualistic *either-or* thought processes or it can invite the rich description of unique experiences and meanings of that which lies outside the boundaries of what was or what was not said. The qualitative approach can be labelled as an “inclusive approach” which recognises and embraces “multiple *truths*” or as Sears (1992:148) puts it “many world realities”.

Against the aforementioned introductory remarks, the researcher’s understanding and application of the research process was documented in Chapters One and Two of the report. This endeavour culminated in the generation of data which were presented as research findings in Chapter Three and in those preceding three chapters the reader was respectively presented with the following:

- Chapter One offered an introduction and general orientation to the study by formulating the ‘problem’ or the ‘issue’ warranting this research endeavour and the motivation for the study. This was followed by the research question, primary goal and objective(s) formulated for the purpose to focus the study. The researcher then briefly depicted the Person Centred Approach (PCA) embedded within the postmodern, social constructivist epistemology as paradigm which underpinned the

study. This in turn directed the researcher to opt for a qualitative research approach to investigating the phenomenon under discussion. In addition Chapter One provided the reader with an overview of the research design and method used as well as the ethical considerations relevant to this study. The key concepts central to this study were clarified and a chapter-wise outline of the research report was provided.

- Chapter Two provided the reader with a description of the application of the qualitative research process in order to investigate the experiences of the fourth level student social workers in their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning University.
- Chapter Three proceeded with the findings of this study which were presented according to themes, sub-themes, categories as well as sub-categories (where applicable). These were supported by direct quotations or storylines from the transcribed interviews. The supportive storylines were either introduced and/or complemented by a literature control, where the findings were compared and contrasted with the existing body of knowledge.

This concluding and final chapter of the research endeavour will expound how the goal of the study was achieved. This goal was formulated as follows at the outset of the study: “to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers’ experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-Learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning University”. The chapter will first present the conclusions arrived at and relating to the research process employed and forward recommendations in this regard. The researcher will then deliberate on the limitations of this study. This will be followed by conclusions relating to the research findings which emerged as six themes from the processes of data analysis and the subsequent discussion between the researcher, the independent coder and the study leader. The researcher will conclude this chapter by making specific recommendations pertaining to the qualitative research process, future research as well as recommendations relating to the practical work education and training of fourth-year student social workers at a Service-learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) University.

4.2 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS APPLIED TO INVESTIGATE THE RESEARCH TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION

This section will provide a summary as well as conclusions and recommendations arising from the qualitative research methodology which guided this study. In accord with Chapter One, section 1.3.1 the researcher will precede the discussion by reflecting on the philosophical underpinnings as an enabling, fitting and/or limiting paradigm for the application of this qualitative research study. This discussion will be followed by a deliberation on the

usefulness and the appropriateness of the qualitative approach with its accompanied design, research method (i.e. the methods of data collection, analysis and verification), as well as the ethical consideration of this study. The section will conclude with the limitations perceived by the researcher relating to the qualitative research process applied to investigate the research topic under discussion.

4.2.1 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO THE RESEARCH APPROACH AND THE FITTINGNESS OF ITS PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The researcher concluded that the post-modern, social construction, person-centred approach as theoretical framework and point of departure for this endeavour (as discussed in Chapter 1: section 1.3.1) provided an enabling and conducive environment for the purpose of developing an in-depth understanding of the fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-Learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning University. This approach provided a framework for "how to" understand, discover and explore. It constantly reminded the researcher to look for and recognise the multiple *truths*, or experiences and meanings attached to these experiences which are embedded and need to be perceived as in a non-static world (cf. Irvin, 1999:38) within a given time and social context. Irvin (1999:38) goes on to quote Foucault who argues that "knowledge is not a permanent faculty, it is an event, or perhaps a series of events" where this knowledge is a construction within and amongst people with language as primary medium used for the meaning making process (Freedman & Combs, 1996:1, 28-29). This knowledge base opened up a process of discovery not limited to a desire to test a singular hypothesis or to find a particular meaning or context for the participants' experiences but rather to search for the richest description of participants' experiences. It enabled the researcher not to rely on her own descriptions or interpretations but to invite and co-involve the participants in this process of meaning-making and understanding.

The researcher concluded that qualitative research provided a fitting vehicle for, as Creswell (2009:175) suggested, reflecting on and in-depth meaning-making about the real life stories of the participants and *with* participants. This approach enabled the researcher to learn from the participants, how they made, described and/or explained their meanings of experiences and not as interpreted by the researcher. As Green and Thorogood (2009:5) mentioned, the qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore and discover the "what", "how" and/or "why" questions of the study concerned. By utilising letter writing, focus group discussions and face-to-face semi-structured interviews the researcher managed to obtain a richer description and understanding from the participants' frame of reference about their practical social work experiences at a Service-learning Centre in the ODL context.

Based on the fittingness of the qualitative research approach and the theoretical framework (i.e. post-modern, social constructivist, person-centred paradigm) followed in this research endeavour with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of experiences related to a specific experience (i.e. that of doing social work practical work training as fourth level student social workers at Bright Site), the researcher wants to recommend to future researchers that a qualitative research approach be favoured, as well as a post-modern, social construction, person-centred theoretical framework if they wish to pursue the goal of developing an understanding of participants' experiences in relation to a phenomenon experienced.

4.2.2 DESIGN THE STUDY

The plan or map which determined how this research was conducted was guided by an explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological strategy of inquiry also known as "the research design". As Green and Thorogood (2009:42) assert, the design logically guided the researcher regarding the "what, how and why of data production". The research design enabled the researcher to consider things like the methods of data collection, how the participants were chosen, when and where the research was done, how the data should be analysed, and how data would be presented.

An explorative research design was used because, as Neuman (2006:33-34) suggests, this design should be followed when little is known about a topic or a phenomenon as it was the case with the fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-Learning Centre of an Open and Distance Learning University. In agreement with Yegidis and Weinbach (1996:92-93) the researcher concluded that the explorative research design enabled the researcher to answer the "what" questions relating to the study under discussion and the six themes that emerged from the study laid the foundation for further research as will be commented on later in this chapter.

After employing the explorative research design to explore the experiences of student social workers surrounding their social work practical training at a Service-learning Centre, the descriptive design (incorporated as part of the strategy of inquiry) allowed the researcher to describe that which was explored. The researcher concurs with Alpaslan (2010:17) that the descriptive and explorative research designs stand in a process-product relationship to each other where the process of exploration culminates in a product (i.e. description of that which was explored).

The researcher concluded that contextual design proved to be fitting as it afforded the researcher an opportunity for gaining an understanding of the experiences of the participants as related to a specific context. The study was context-specific in relating to the participants'

experiences of their social work practical work training within the context of a Service-learning Centre in an ODL environment.

The researcher arrived at the conclusion that the phenomenological research design was a good match to be included in the strategy of inquiry. It enabled the researcher to encapsulate “the lived experience of individuals and their intentions within their ‘life-world’” and ask “what was it like [to have a particular experience] or having had experienced something” (cf. Crabtree and Miller, 1999:25) (i.e. “how it was for the participants” to do their social work practical work training at Bright Site?”)

With reference to the research design used for this research project and the conclusion arrived at by the researcher (referred to above) the researcher wants to recommend that an explorative, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological design be accepted as an appropriate design to be used when the objectives of a research endeavour are: to explore and describe in-depth the experiences of participants related to a specific phenomenon experienced from their frame of reference and seen against and understood from a particular context (cf. Neuman, 2006:33-34; Yegidis & Weinbach, 1996:92-93; Schurink, 1998:281; Crabtree & Miller, 1999:25).

4.2.3 THE RESEARCH METHOD

The ensuing discussion concerning the research method will arrive at conclusions and recommendations regarding issues of population, sampling, and method of data collection and data analysis, as well as data verification.

4.2.3.1 Population and sampling

In reflecting back on the research process, and specifically on the aspects of population and sampling, the researcher concluded that the decision taken to include the whole population (for phases one and two of the data collection process) was appropriate, especially in view of the fact that the population totalled only 18 participants. Out of this population the number of participants involved in phases one and two of the data collection process totalled 11, as personal circumstances and social work practical work obligations prevented the total population from being involved in both of the mentioned phases. Had the researcher decided to not include the whole population in the mentioned phases of data collection, the absenteeism would have resulted in a less comprehensive data set.

In looking back, the researcher came to the conclusion that the purposive sampling technique employed (to procure participants for phase three of the data collection process) had proved

to be effective in that participants were, as also suggested by Fossey et al. (2002:726), “information rich” in their ability to provide information to answer the research questions posed at the outset of the study. They all had first-hand knowledge of and were directly involved in social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL institution. The researcher therefore recommends that where a researcher has the desire to obtain rich descriptions and comprehensive answers to a research question, “informed” and “information-rich participants” should be sought and the researcher may hand-pick them by employing the purposive sampling technique (cf. Fossey et al., 2002:726).

4.2.3.2 Method of data collection

In the discussion below the researcher will draw conclusions and formulate recommendations relating to how the participants were prepared for the activity of data collection, the methods used for data collection, and the interviewing skills that were used.

(i) Preparation of the participants for the activity of data collection

In preparing the individuals who consented verbally to participate in this research study, the researcher adhered to the following pointers suggested by Rogers and Bouey (1996:65-66) not only for preparing the participants for the aforementioned activity, but also to orientate them about the proposed study. In a group meeting where all 18 participants were present the researcher informed them about: the goal and the potential value of the research; the practicalities of what their participation would entail; why they in particular were selected as participants, as well as what their rights were. During this meeting opportunities were provided for them to ask questions and request further clarification of issues and uncertainties. Although the individuals consented verbally to participate in this research project the researcher also obtained their voluntary and informed consent in writing at the end of this meeting. In looking back at this activity on how the participants were orientated about this research project and specifically prepared for the activity of data collection, the researcher concludes that this was a successful exercise as it paved the way for data collection where the participants were aware of what was expected of them. Providing the questions to the participants prior to each phase of the data collection allowed them to spend sufficient time in deliberating well-thought-through, descriptive responses. With reference to the face-to-face semi-structured interviews the way of preparing the participants by *inter alia* providing them with the prompt and questions contained in the interview-guide orientated and allowed them the opportunity to co-construct the questions required for the interview process to follow. One can argue that this practice (of providing participants with questions beforehand and inviting them to contribute to the list of questions to be covered during an interview) could lead to socially correct answers or give the participants the opportunity to tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear. However, when in search of an in-depth understanding of

a phenomenon accompanied by rich descriptions of unique experiences and meanings, the researcher will still recommend that questions be provided beforehand to participants as this will allow for well-thought-through rich detailed descriptions.

As discussed in Chapter One, sections 1.3.1 and 1.5.2.1, the researcher simultaneously occupied the position of researcher, Service-learning Centre manager and lecturer in relation to the participants. This might be regarded as an ambiguous context which could have impacted on the efforts to build a trusting relationship with the participants and in return could impact on the quality of data collected. However, by transferring the interactive teaching style and the use of continuous action, reflection and planning in the lecturing and supervising of these students to the activity of the research proved to have created an inviting and enabling environment for the participants to engage in as part of this research endeavour. This teaching and learning style adopted prior to the research and transferred to the research context allowed for and largely compensated for the ambiguity in the role of the researcher where it fostered a culture of participation and participatory evaluation. The researcher therefore also recommends that, within a context where the researcher sits on more than one especially conflicting chairs, in relation to the participants, continuous participatory evaluation be used as tool to facilitate ownership and trust in the research process (cf. Schenk et al., 2010:220; Feldman et al., 2003:36).

(ii) Methods used for data collection

Data in this study were collected in three phases using letter writing, a focus group interview (as respectively phases one and two of the data collection process) and face-to-face semi-structured interviews (with five participants in phase three of the process of data collection) all aided by interview-guides containing questions and prompts relevant to the topic under investigation. In retrospect the researcher concludes that the chosen qualitative methods of data collection were well suited to this study as they made facilitated opportunities possible for the participants to share their thoughts, perspectives and experiences which laid the foundation for gaining an in-depth understanding of the social work practical work training experiences of the participants at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL setting (cf. East et al., 2010:18).

In reflecting specifically on the three-phased process of data collection, the researcher came to the conclusion that the stepping stones served as building blocks contributing towards the evolving, expansion and deepening of the participants' accounts of their experiences in relation to their social work practical work training at Bright Site. Through the triangulation of data methods (cf. Yegidis & Weinbach 1996:218) the participants were invited during the focus group discussion to further explore and elaborate the themes and issues that emerged from the letters written to loved ones. The sample of five participants could during the face-to-

face semi-structured interviews once again further explore and elaborate on the themes and issues which emerged from the focus group discussion. Through this three-phased process of data collection the participants were thus invited to co-interpret the data and engaged in new and expanded dialogues during the following phases of the data collection. The researcher wants to recommend to other researchers such a phased process of data collection and the triangulation of data methods, especially where the evolving, expansion and deepening of participants' accounts and/or experiences of a topic under investigation are pursued.

The researcher can conclude that the interviewing skills used in a Person Centred and narrative therapeutic context are transferable to the research environment as they enhanced a line of discussions that explored and unlocked the voice of untold stories, from the frames of reference of the participants, in order to yield a richer more in-depth description of the phenomenon under study. The researcher arrived at the conclusion that the range of communication and interviewing skills used during the processes of data collection complemented the data collection methods and were well suited to the activity of data collection as they afforded the participants an opportunity to comprehensively describe their unique experiences and meanings attached to these experiences. Deconstructive listening as a way of listening to and unpacking a story within a broader cultural context of beliefs, practices, and ideas opened up a space for the researcher to speculate about and eventually explore what the participants *did not say* to her (cf. Morgan, 2000:45. Freedman & Combs, 1996:46). It provided a context for the researcher to understand and accept the participants' stories of vulnerability but also to enable and encourage participants to retell the same story exploring and voicing the marginalised experiences, practices and meanings (i.e. the knowledge, skills, and abilities discovered during their social work practical work training experience) attached to the story (cf. Freedman & Combs, 1996:46; Schenck et al., 2010:119). Deconstructive listening paved the way for the researcher to then use a range of questioning (i.e. appreciative inquiry, landscape of action and landscape of meaning questions, detailed-orientated probes, elaboration probes and clarification probes) in facilitation of the in-depth discussion and exploration of the social work practical work training experiences of the participants. Attentiveness and empathy proved to create conditions conducive to the freedom of expression by giving attention to the verbal, non-verbal, and implied messages of the participants (cf. Grobler et al., 2003:128-129, 152-153). As a recommendation the researcher wants to invite researchers to transfer interviewing skills traditionally used in therapeutic context to the process of data collection in the qualitative research process as this can support and complement the methods of data collection employed.

In this study, all interviews as well as the letter writing were conducted in English which is also the primary medium of education at Unisa. The data were collected at Bright Site from June 2010 to January 2011. This was a familiar setting for the participants as it was also the setting

where they were placed for fourth-level social work practical work training. The researcher concludes that conducting the interviews in a familiar setting and in a secondary language (over which they had a fair to good amount of command) contributed to a situation where the participants felt safe and where they could express themselves freely and with ease.

Data were recorded with the consent of the participants by means of the letters written by the participants to their loved ones, written feedback and notes kept by participants and the researcher during the focus group discussion, and tape recordings made of the discussions during face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Upon reflection, the researcher came to the conclusion that these means of data collection were an appropriate choice for this study as they enabled the researcher to reflect upon and to understand the participants' verbal and non-verbal accounts in a holistic manner. They also increased the accuracy of the data collected and granted the participants the luxury of the researcher's undivided attention.

In view of the conclusions arrived at (and referred to above) relating to the activity of the preparation of the participants for data collection, the methods of data collection employed, the interviewing skills used and methods of data recording, the following are recommended for qualitative researchers who aim to come to an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon:

- Consider collecting data over a period of time to provide participants with the optimal opportunity to explore and describe their experiences and meanings attached to those experiences relating to the phenomenon under investigation.
- Use different qualitative methods of data collection and recoding of the data.
- Employ a variety of interviewing techniques. Do not be shy to adopt interviewing skills traditionally used in the realm of therapeutic interviewing in service of research, especially when it comes to complementing the process and methods of data collection.

4.2.4 METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

In this study the researcher used the eight steps of Tesch (in Creswell, 2009:186) to guide her in the process of how to analyse the data generated through employing the discussed methods of data collection. The researcher can conclude that this process and the method of data analysis were suitable for the data gathered from the participants as they provided a coherent, logical and systematic approach to data analysis. The inductive nature of this method of data analysis assisted the researcher to identify multiple realities related to the fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre within an ODL context (cf. Maree and Van der Westhuizen, 2007:37). This method assisted the researcher to condense the voluminous information gathered into themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories as well as generating patterns and relationships amongst the data. This method of data analysis is recommended for any qualitative study as it provides a coherent, logical and systematic

approach to analysing great volumes of data and generates themes and relationships regarding the data.

4.2.5 METHODS OF DATA VERIFICATION

Cognisant of the relative nature of data verification in qualitative research, and that arguments and issues of reliability and validity can be questioned in qualitative research by asking who verifies and according to which benchmark, data verification in this research was guided and informed by the strategies (cf. Gibbs as cited in Creswell, 2009:190; Krefting, 1991:214; Sears, 1992:149.) to truthfully reflect the meanings participants ascribed to the experiences related to their social work practical work training at Bright Site.

The researcher arrived at the conclusion that the following data verification strategies employed by the researcher enabled her to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings:

- Time triangulation: The fact that the researcher collected data at different points in time, enabled her to verify the collected data over this period of time which in turn informed the subsequent directions of exploration and provided for a more detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation as well as enhancing the reliability of the data (cf. Carpenter 2007:380)
- Triangulation of data methods (i.e. letter writing, a focus group discussion and the face-to-face semi-structured interviews) and data sources (i.e. the different participants) also added to the validity of data.
- Through peer examination and consultation the opinions of the study leader, colleagues and co-workers were sought (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:38). Their experiences and expertise, guidance, advice, and suggestions contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. The credibility of the research findings was further ensured through the use of an independent coder who conducted the data analysis independently from the researcher. Findings from the independent coder's report were compared with the researcher's findings during a consensus discussion facilitated by the study leader.
- Member checking proved to be effective as data verification strategy where transcripts of the face-to-face interviews were given to the participants in order to check the accuracy of the contents and the meanings attached. A copy of the research findings was also presented as a hard copy to the participants in order to clarify the meanings and interpretation in the report and provided the participants with an added opportunity for further elaboration which in return enhanced a richer description of data (cf. Creswell, 2009:191).
- Crystallisation as practice of validating the results provided the researcher with the opportunity to also draw attention to discrepant and/or contradictory information that ran

counter to the themes. This practice enhanced the real-life reflection of the data (cf. Maree and Van der Westhuizen 2007:40-41).

- Spending prolonged time in the field provided the space for the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the social work practical work experiences of fourth-year students at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL institution (cf. Creswell, 2009:192).

It is recommended that qualitative researchers, who have the desire to arrive at an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon true to the participants' frame of reference, should consciously employ a number of data verification techniques in an attempt to provide a rich and trustworthy description of the explored phenomenon under investigation.

4.2.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this research the participants ultimately endured the professional and personal consequences of the study. Kotze's (2002:21) process of ethicising aided by Swanepoel and de Beer's (2006:208) "participatory self-evaluation" proved to be effective in co-involving participants in a continuous process of participatory evaluation where not just the impact and effectiveness of their social work practical training but simultaneously also the impact of the study was voiced and reflected upon. Providing participants with the content of the findings and transcriptions of the semi-structured face-to-face interviews enabled them to reflect on the content of the findings, the way the information was gathered, and to explore deeper and/or different or more suitable ways of enabled reflection. As a result participants could co-construct and largely depict the content and process of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Similarly, during the focus group discussion participants omitted certain questions provided in the interview guideline in exercising their control and preference over the interview contents and process.

Obtaining informed consent from participants enabled them to make informed and voluntary decisions, based on the explanation of all relevant information, as to whether or not to participate in the study.

By ensuring anonymity and confidentiality (i.e. by using alphabetic numbering and pseudonyms to keep participants' identities anonymous) and by also managing information (the letters of the participants, the notes of the focus group interview and the tape recordings and transcriptions of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews) in a confidential manner (i.e. keeping it safe, and ensuring that names of the participants and the alphabetical numbers allocated to each name were not in the same place) participants largely had the power and right to control when and under what conditions others had access to their data (cf. Monette et al., 2008:57). This privacy also created a safe environment for the participants where they could share their experiences and the meanings ascribed to them.

The debriefing of one participant after a face-to-face semi-structured interview helped her to deal with and make sense of her distressed feelings which had resulted from sharing these experiences.

It is recommended that qualitative researchers should cultivate a culture of *ethicising with* their participants where participants co-create the *barometer* for monitoring the implemented ethical principles. It is further recommended that researchers adopt ethical practices and listen to and adhere to ethical principles, as co-constructed by participants, when they conduct qualitative studies in order to create a safe and an enabling environment for the participants in which to share honest information about their experiences without any fear of potential harm.

The ensuing section of this chapter will deliberate on the researcher's perceived limitations of the research process.

4.2.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS APPLIED TO INVESTIGATE THE RESEARCH TOPIC UNDER DISCUSSION

The first perceived limitation for the researcher was the intention to follow a purist "postmodern" or "post-positivist" philosophical approach to the study. However being informed by Rofle's (2006:307-309) arguments against the over simplistic and generalised assumption of qualitative research as belonging to a "post-positivist" paradigm and quantitative research belonging to "positivist" paradigm, the researcher discovered that this intentional "post-modern" pursuit did not indeed materialise. As Rofle (2006:307-309) indicates some qualitative methods and practices might be founded upon the same philosophical criteria as the quantitative approach and vice versa. The following is relevant to this study: the use of an independent coder and the process of data analysis where data were categorised based on the *essence* of an interview were more fitting with a positivist paradigm. Such a search for essence gives prominence to the understandings and interpretations of the independent coder with the added danger that the search for *essence* might neglect other marginalised meanings. However, the researcher tried to compensate for potential limited or singular interpretations of data in the form of the above discussed member checking as method of validating data as well as allowing for, and recognising, multiple descriptions of and meanings attached to experiences (cf. Creswell, 2009:191).

The second limitation was the occurrence of absenteeism by the participants during phases one and two of the process of data collection. Although the two phases combined represented the whole population of eighteen students, absenteeism occurred (due to personal circumstances and unforeseen obligations related to their social work practical work) in both

phases. This had the implication that only eleven out of the eighteen participants took part in phases one (letter writing) and two of the data collection process (focus group discussion). Although saturation of data still took place one could argue that an even richer more comprehensive discussion of the participants' experiences could have been achieved if some participants had not been absent.

Green and Thorogood (2009:24) advise researchers to critically reflect on, amongst other factors, their role as researchers in the generation of the findings. Resulting from this reflection the researcher concluded that the multiple and at times conflicting roles occupied in relation to the participants were a limitation in generating data. In addition to the role of being the researcher she also fulfilled the role, and had the added responsibility, of managing the Service-learning Centre (which implied, amongst other duties, the monitoring of and quality control of students' social work practical work training). Furthermore, as community development lecturer the researcher was responsible for performing the formative and summative evaluations of the participants enrolled in this module. Mindful that this unequal power relationship could tempt participants to provide the researcher with selective socially or academically correct responses, the researcher consciously strived to foster an environment of participation and co-ownership (i.e. via amongst other actions continuous participatory self-evaluation and by inviting the participants to co-construct the research questions in phase three of the process of data collection) where the participants as "experts" were invited to speak authoritatively about their experiences related to their social work practical work training at Bright Site.

In critically reflecting back on the questions and prompts included in the respective interview-guides the researcher came to the conclusion that some of the questions and prompts were unrelated to the study or not in line with what the participants regarded as important aspects to explore as part of the research.¹⁹ However, with the participants being active co-contributors to topics to be covered in the focus group discussion, they decided to exclude questions one, four and eight (formulated in relation to the topics to be explored and which had been incorporated in the interview-guide for focusing the focus group discussion), as they felt that questions one and four had been extensively covered in the letters they compiled, while question eight was not directly related to the topic of the research and was rather part of the researcher's agenda. (See chapter two sections 2.4.2 of this report.)

The last limitation was related to the fact that the researcher neglected to let the participants sign a declaration of confidentiality amongst all participants. In this research report it might be possible for participants to identify some of the storylines with the respective participants in

¹⁹ The researcher refers here to the questions posed in the interview guide for the focus group discussion with reference to: the way the participants think they have changed relating to what they became aware of, or the way they think as result of their training at Bright Site (as question one), the exploration of the sacrifices made by participants during the course of their training (as question four) and the question about the participants report writing skills as questions eight.

view of the fact they had the choice of with whom they would like to engage in letter writing as well as with whom they would like to be in the smaller “brainstorming” groups during the focus group discussion.

Despite the limitations noted above, the researcher came to the conclusion that the chosen approach, with the design and research method inherent in the chosen approach, aided in answering the goal formulated at the outset of the study and helped to realise the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of the social work practical work training experiences of fourth-year student social workers at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL university. The study was approached from and founded in the theoretical perspectives of the post-modern, social constructivist and person-centred approaches (i.e. triangulation of theoretical perspectives). The study was further informed by the multiple perspectives of different participants (triangulation of data sources) through the utilisation of multiple data collection methods (letter writing, focus groups discussion, and semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews – i.e. triangulation of data sources) for a shared affirmation of the data (cf. Krefting, 1991:219), which resulted in the richness of the data.

The next section of the chapter will proceed with a summary of and conclusion on the research findings followed by recommendations.

4.3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, a summary of and conclusions on the research findings will be presented in respect of the six themes that emerged during the data analysis processes. These themes, sub-themes, categories and sub-categories were identified by means of: the processes of data analysis independently undertaken by the researcher and an independent coder, as well as written feedback provided on the transcripts of the transcribed interviews from the five participants who engaged in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This was followed by a consensus discussion between the researcher and independent coder as facilitated by the study leader.

All six themes directly relate to the research goal and provide answers to the research question which was formulated as follows at the outset of the study: *What are the experiences of fourth level student social workers, at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service- learning Centre?*

The discussion will be preceded by a summary of the demographical data of participants. The six main themes that emerged from the research findings are presented in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1: The six main themes derived from the research findings

<p>Theme 1: The participants' understanding and experience of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting</p>
<p>Theme 2: The participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities</p>
<p>Theme 3: Participants' reflections on their experience of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting</p>
<p>Theme 4: Challenges experienced by participants during their social work practical work training at Bright Site</p>
<p>Theme 5: Support experienced by the participants while engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site</p>
<p>Theme 6: Suggestions from participants relating to (1) aspects of the social work practical placement setting and training that must remain unchanged, (2) the selection criteria for fourth-level students to be placed for their social work practical work placement at Bright Site, and (3) how to manage the challenges experienced during the social work practical training in this setting</p>

A summary of the demographical particulars²⁰

All but one of the eighteen participants was female which correlates with Subotzky's (2010) findings that female students at Unisa have increased from 54% in 2004 to 60.2% in 2009. The average age of participants was 31 years at the time of conducting the study, ranging between 23 and 48 years. Reflecting the typical Unisa demographic profile, fifteen of the eighteen participants who participated in this study were African students, two were coloured and one student was white (cf. Subotzky, 2010). Seven of the 18 participants were married, ten were single and one is divorced. Seven of the 18 participants had children who were still dependent on them and for whom they had to care, a trend correlating with a study undertaken by Collins et.al (2010:965) indicating social work students are mostly mature with multiple adult responsibilities and roles. Fourteen of the 18 participants were unemployed with only four participants being full-time employed. Nine of the participants who were unemployed were dependent on family members for financial assistance during the time of their studies. The other five unemployed participants studied with either a loan (in the case of three participants) or a bursary (in the case of two participants). All the participants who were full-

²⁰ For a tabulated depiction of the biographical particulars of the participants the reader is referred to Chapter 3: Section 3.2.1 Table 3.1

time employed funded their own studies. Only four of the participants stayed in the same geographical area, namely Sunnyside, where the Bright Site is situated. All the other participants stayed in or around the greater Pretoria area.

All six themes will now be presented separately, one after the other.

4.3.1 THEME 1: THE PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF BRIGHT SITE AS A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT SETTING

From the research findings (related specifically to this theme, its seven sub-themes, categories and even sub-categories) the participants' understanding of and experiences related to Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting also known as "a field placement setting"²¹ became evident.

A research finding (and conclusion) that clearly surfaced, as first sub-theme, was what participants *understood* a practical work placement setting was. They understood Bright Site to be a field placement setting - a place where they had the opportunity to apply their acquired knowledge and skills in a practice context as part of the requirements for completion of their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree. This finding is also verified by the literature in that a social work practical work placement setting should provide a context where students could complete the practical work component of the BSW degree (Lawlor, 2008:19). The participants' articulated understanding of Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting also correlates with the prescribed SAQA exit level outcomes of the BSW degree in South Africa as well as the practical work requirements as set out by the Standard Generating Body (SGB) for Social Work (SAQA., 2006[d]; Lawlor, 2008:19).

A second sub-theme under the theme being discussed focused on the *participants' experiences of Bright Site as a social work practical work placement setting*. From the metaphors used, during the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, as well as excerpts from the letters written by a cohort of participants describing and referring to their experiences of doing practical work at the Bright Site, the researcher concluded the following:

- Bright Site as practical work placement setting provided participants with a context where they felt nurtured, where they could grow at their own unique pace without being compared with others.
- Within the Bright site context participants experienced that they managed to grow and develop trust in their strengths and knowledge. At the onset of the placement participants felt uncertain about what the practical placement would entail, fear for

²¹ A field placement is a setting or context where fourth level students are placed for the completion of the practical work component of the BSW degree at Unisa. This setting is usually a non-profit organisation, an office of the Department of Social Development or any other setting where professional social services are provided (Lawlor, 2008:19).

failure manifested and they felt emotionally under pressure to be successful and master their practical work. However, as a result of engaging themselves in their social work practical training and their experience in this regard they departed from a place of uncertainty or not knowing at the beginning of the placement and journeyed towards being confident and personally and professionally integrated at the end.

- Whilst being engaged in their social work practical work training at Bright Site the participants were ***engaged in various activities*** which emerged as the third sub-theme of this section and included the following:
 - Case, group and community work with individuals, families, groups and communities equipped and expanded the participants' "knowledge and understanding of human behaviour and social systems and the skills to intervene at the points where people interact with their environments in order to promote social well-being" as well as developing and expanding the participants' abilities to "plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies and techniques at micro, mezzo and macro levels" (SAQA, 2006:1 & 3).
 - The participants also had to perform specific organisational duties (i.e. marketing, the up-keep of an organisation's data base, and delivering social work service to individuals, groups and communities within a cross-cultural and diverse environment) which afforded them opportunities and experiences to work effectively with others in a team or a group, with other professionals, organisations and the community as prescribed by SAQA (SAQA, 2006:1, 4 & 5).
 - The participants also regularly engaged in supervision and the supervisory experience assisted them with the integration of theory and practice, the developing of professional skills, as well as developing professionally related values and attitudes (cf. Thabede & Green, 2010:6).
 - Additional weekly interactive training, added-on training, or training not covered by, but complementing the fourth-year social work practical work curriculum was another point on the activity agenda of the participants. These training endeavours were aimed at narrowing the typical ODL gap, in breaking the isolation between students and their study material, students and peers and students and lecturers, especially with regard to students who were underprepared for higher education in the background of Unisa's open policy (cf. UNISA, 2008[a]:27; Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010:7-8).
 - The researcher arrived at the conclusion that the regular consultation with the contact person, representing the specific placement setting, in this case the Bright Site as field placement setting proved to be very supportive to the participants in that it, amongst other factors, orientated the participants regarding organisational policy and procedures (i.e. the dress code, punctuality and ethical behaviour). Furthermore, the researcher concluded from the participants' accounts that this relationship with the contact person can also be ambiguous in

that demanding day-to-day practice schedules could lessen the availability of the contact person resulting in great frustration of the participants.

All the activities referred to above (forming part of the participants' experiences at Bright Site) took place in a milieu where they had to take co-ownership of their training by providing them the space necessary to co-construct, as far as possible (within the parameters of the organisation's mandate and not disregarding organisational needs), "how" these activities related to their training should be executed. This required the participants to incorporate the planning in relation to their envisaged organisational activities in measurable and official operational business plans. This way of working fostered and enhanced increased student involvement, engagement and participation which are referred to as some of the prerequisites but also as some of the advantages of service-learning (cf. Score, 2010:79).

In reflecting on the student accounts with reference to the activities the participants engaged in during their social work practical work training at Bright Site and how they experienced those activities and being engaged with them, the researcher arrived at the conclusion that the range of activities the participants were exposed to and engaged in contributed to the participants' level of gradueness. These activities enhanced attributes, skills, values and discipline being characteristic of a person being graduated for a professional career (cf. Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann 2004:313-314). The researcher furthermore concluded that characteristics attributed to gradueness could be transferred from the practical teaching context into a real life employment context.

Various advantages attached to the Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting emerged as a fourth sub-theme under the theme being discussed. From the accounts of the participants the researcher came to the conclusion that the participants experienced the following as advantages in their being placed at Bright Site for their social work practical work training:

- Participants reported having more direct contact with and access to lecturers as result of the Bright Site placement setting as an advantage.
- The second advantage attached to being placed at the Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting was that participants perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable and skilled than their counterparts. They ascribe this to all the learning opportunities created at the Bright Site (i.e. extra trainings, organisational duties, case, group and community work etc.)
- Being exposed to multi-cultures came to the fore as another advantage. It concurs with the literature relating to service-learning as promoting the learners' access to, exposure to and understanding of, as well as competencies in relation to cultural diversity (cf. Kielsmeier, 2011:6; Simons et al., date unknown:25; Internet Home Page of The Community Service-Learning Centre, 2011).

From the research findings it became clear and it can be concluded that participants regard ***certain personal qualities*** (emerging as sub-theme in this section) as ***needed in order to endure a social work practical work placement at Bright Site***. These personal qualities include: being committed, disciplined, and focused and having the ability to work independently. The literature relating to studying part-time at Unisa towards qualifying to become social workers, as well as those on service-learning, resonates with the above conclusion in that students studying within such a milieu need to be motivated, engaged and self-disciplined (cf. Bourn and Bootle, 2005:348; Lintvelt, 2008:35).

Another conclusion arrived at based on the accounts of the participants provided under sub-theme six was that the participants experienced ***Bright Site*** as social work practical work placement setting ***as being person-centred in its approach and day-to-day practices***. In regard to its being person-centred the participants were invited to share in the decision-making about and implementation of the training programme, as well as having their thoughts, opinions and decisions valued. This approach dovetails with Unisa's focus on student centredness as well as the Department of Social Services' developmental approach (Unisa, 2008[a]:2; Patel 2003:1; Lombard, 2010:1-2).

From the accounts the participants presented under the seventh sub-theme (i.e. Personal changes experienced by participants through their social work practical work placement at the Bright Site) of the theme under discussion **the researcher came to the conclusion that the participants have changed as people as a result of their social work practical work training and experiences at Bright Site:**

- The participants' perceptions of believing in themselves mostly evolved during their social work practical work year at Bright Site. The research findings bear testimony to the fact that they were very scared and displayed very little belief in their own abilities at the outset of their social work practical work training. For most participants, their belief in themselves had evolved by mid-year, and towards the end of the year they had a sense of accomplishment and belief in their own abilities.
- The participants became aware of a new individual self as a result of their social work practical work training experience at Bright Site. They referred to being more focused, more self-disciplined, "less afraid to go out there and try new things", becoming braver and discovering inner strengths. This conclusion correlates with the studies of O'Connor and Cordova (2010:366), relating to the experiences of adults who work full-time whilst studying part-time, as well as those of Thabede and Green (2010:6), relating to fourth level student social workers at Unisa where participants indicated that they had learned about themselves, become more self-reliant and discovered a new self as result of their practical work learning experiences.

- The research findings also bear testimony to the participants' personal and professional growth and development which enabled them to transfer the skills and attitudes acquired in the social work practical work field placement setting within and to the real life social work practice. Barrie (2006:229-231, 234) refers to such student development as an enabled conceptualisation on student gradueness which relates to the learners' ability to "shape and transform knowledge to meet new challenges and contexts" which includes intellectual and personal development.
- The researcher further concludes that the participants' *perceptions about other people* changed as a result of their social work practical work training at Bright Site. They developed a willingness to learn from the people, a respect for people as human beings, an appreciation of the local knowledge and wisdom of the people, compassion for people's suffering, and humbleness towards people. These changes in the perceptions about other people resonate with what Swanepoel and de Beer (2006:50) describe as important attitudes a worker should have in connecting and working with people in communities.

The next section of the report will deliberate on the conclusions from the research findings related to the participants' experiences of practical work in real life communities

4.3.2 THEME 2: THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF PRACTICAL WORK IN REAL LIFE COMMUNITIES

This theme unfolded into three sub-themes (see Chapter 3: section 3.3.2).

When reflecting on the participants' account relating to the communities in which they did their social work practical work (see sub-theme 1 in Chapter 3: section 3.3.2.1) the researcher came to the conclusion that these were communities "with urgent, pressing needs but not always having the access to relevant resources" (cf. Rohleder et al., 2008:255). These communities thus provided a context that allowed for social work practical work training in a diverse and true-to-life world. This context resembles what Unisa's Directorate for Curriculum and Learning Development (DCLD) refers to as "rich Africanised environments for active learning (REALs)" (Louw, 2010:50). This learning milieu is further labelled by Louw (2010:50) as "an authentic context" to learn in. These placement settings are considered appropriate routes for higher education to take in order to adequately prepare health and social service students for practice (cf. Rohleder et al., 2008:255).

The researcher further concludes that participants' engagement with the real-life bread-and-butter issues in their communities provided for valuable learning opportunities in that it enhanced the participants' awareness of the fact that they can learn from and *with* the people in the community (see sub-theme 2; in Chapter 3: section 3.3.2.2). Participants, as future

change agents, learned to value the communities' local knowledge, wisdom and ways of doing as being a primary step in facilitating development or change (cf. Swanepoel & de Beer, 2006:52 & 159-161).

From the participants' accounts the researcher further concludes that the participants experienced that the communities they were involved with benefited from this engagement (see sub-theme 3 in Chapter 3: section: 3.3.2.3). Through the participants' engagement with and involvement in communities, the latter became aware of, and started to utilise their own capacities and abilities to mobilise resources in order to improve their quality of life as defined by, and in realisation of the communities' unique frame of reference. These experiences of participants and conclusions arrived at correspond with a cohort of students, (also engaged in service-learning) from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Bell's (2007:152) study, in which they too mentioned that communities they engaged with benefited and appreciated their involvement with them.

The ensuing discussion will conclude the participants' experiences relating to supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting.

4.3.3 THEME 3: PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR EXPERIENCE OF SUPERVISION AT BRIGHT SITE AS SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT SETTING

In this section the researcher will present a summary accompanied by conclusions on the research findings (which emerged as three closely interrelated sub-themes) related to participants' experience of supervision at Bright Site as social work practical work placement setting (see Chapter 3: subsections 3.3.3.1-3.3.3.3).

From the research findings the researcher concludes that the participants -

- Understood supervision to be a place where they received educational, emotional, and administrative support in relation to their social work practical work training.
- Experienced supervision as valuable in that it guided their application of subject-knowledge and skills into practice.
- Understood and valued supervision as a context where they were provided with the opportunities to not just attach meanings to their learning experiences but where they were also co-constructing the learning process via interactive group discussions and peer group learning. These experiences correlate with a constructivist, postmodern approach to supervision, where the role of the supervisor will be highlighted not around her subject specific knowledge but rather in her ability to facilitate interaction

in order for the supervisee to create meaning and understanding (cf. Van Dyk and Harrison, 2008:14-15).

- Experienced the supervisor as a supportive, gentle, caring and helpful person.

In the following section the researcher will arrive at a summary and conclusions relating to the challenges experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site.

4.3.4 THEME 4: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY PARTICIPANTS DURING THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT BRIGHT SITE

From the participants' accounts the researcher arrived at the conclusion that the following were experienced as challenges whilst engaging in their fourth level social work practical work training at Bright Site:

- **Financial difficulties and insufficient funds** (This challenge is not only characteristic of the participants but is a challenge for a large cohort of Unisa's student population (cf. Heydenrych and Prinsloo, 2010:7).)
- **The fact that the participants' personal safety was , at times, jeopardized during the course of their social work practical work training at Bright Site was another challenge experienced.** These experiences are echoed in Kosny and Eakin's (2008:149-150) findings that workers in non-profit organisations are often exposed to circumstances detrimental to their safety.
- Whilst working in groups as part of supervision and in executing organisational duties labelled as "constructive" and "supportive experiences", this **working in groups was also perceived as a challenge** and at times "highly frustrating" and even perceived as "unfair". These sentiments, amongst others, were underscored in the literature consulted (cf. Todd and Strom, 1997:323; Zastrow, 2010:197).
- **The high work load was articulated as a challenge.** The research findings in a previous study by Lintvelt (2008:82) amongst fourth-year social work students also point to this as a challenge.

The ensuing discussion will present a summary and conclusions relating to the support experienced by the participants whilst engaging in their social work practical work training at Bright Site.

4.3.5 THEME 5: SUPPORT EXPERIENCED BY THE PARTICIPANTS WHILE ENGAGING IN THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT BRIGHT SITE

As is evident from the research findings it can be concluded that the participants enjoyed support from various sources whilst engaging in their social work practical work training. Support externally or outside of the participants' direct learning environment (i.e. the Bright Site as placement setting) was noted. In this regard the family and friends provided valuable support to participants during their training. This concurs and corresponds with one of the findings in Wade's (2009:471) study, focusing on the topic of "Unisa Social Work students' experiences of trauma", where she found that family and friends were largely identified by participants as the most common sources of help in dealing with emotional distress.

Apart from the external sources of support referred to above, the researcher arrived at the conclusion that the participants enjoyed support from various internal sources (i.e. people inside the learning environment of the participants). The following persons were mentioned as internal sources of support: The supervisors, the contact person for fourth-year student social workers at Bright Site, lecturers who were accessible, the peer group, the secretary at Bright Site providing administrative support and the counselling services offered by the counsellor at Bright Site.

The next section will summarise and arrive at conclusions relating to suggestions from participants relating to: (1) aspects of the social work practical training that must remain unchanged, (2) the selection criteria for fourth-level students to be placed for their social work practical work placement at Bright Site, and (3) how to manage the challenges experienced during the social work practical training at this setting.

4.3.6 THEME 6: SUGGESTIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS RELATING TO (1) ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL PLACEMENT SETTING AND TRAINING THAT MUST REMAIN UNCHANGED, (2) THE SELECTION CRITERIA FOR FOURTH-LEVEL STUDENTS TO BE PLACED FOR THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK PLACEMENT AT BRIGHT SITE, AND (3) HOW TO MANAGE THE CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED DURING THE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL TRAINING IN THIS SETTING

The Person Centred Approach and Unisa's Tuition Policy (Unisa, 2005[a]:2, 5) call for amongst others student centredness primarily through participation, constant critical reflection and the encouragement of students "to be active, engaged and involved participants in their own learning process, reflecting on what and how they learn, and making connections to the workplace and to their broader communities". Dovetailing this policy and approach to the research process the researcher therefore actively strove to obtain the opinions of the

participants relating to the aforementioned which emerged as theme 6 (see Chapter 3; subsections 3.3.6.1-3.3.6.3 for the discussion of this theme).

From some of the accounts of the participants (presented under theme 6) the researcher arrived at the conclusion that there are ***aspects relating to the practical work placement setting and training at Bright Site that should remain unchanged***. In this regard the participants recommended the following to remain unchanged:

- The ability of Bright Site's management and staff to communicate and demonstrate a sense of care towards the students.
- The accessibility of lecturers to students.
- The context created by Bright Site for peer group learning and support.
- The extra training that facilitated the understanding and application of theory into real life situations.
- The type of organisational activities, referring specifically to the marketing of Bright Site services by students as well as their networking with other organisations and students engaged with as part of their training.

With reference to the participants' ***recommendations on proposed selection criteria to be used for fourth-year student social workers in order to be placed at Bright Site for their social work practical work training***, the researcher concluded that the participants were in different minds. Whilst some participants suggested clear selection criteria to be taken into consideration before placing a student at the mentioned Site (i.e. the student must be able to access the Service-learning Centre, it is preferred that students should rather not be working full-time and prospective students need to have strong academic records), others merely mentioned that students should be committed to their studies in order to be placed at Bright Site.

In further attestation to the research findings, some of the participants made clear recommendations (which emerged as five categories during the process of data analysis) on ***how to deal with challenges experienced*** by student social workers during their placement at the Bright Site.

The researcher concludes that the participants came up with creative, pragmatic and feasible recommendations on how:

- **To deal with the *hidden costs* as a challenge imbedded in the social work practical work training.** They suggested that Bright Site as organisation set aside funding to assist students financially and make students more aware of the estimated and hidden costs attached to the practical work. Participants further noted that future students should support each other as peer group and have very open and honest discussions with family

members with regard to the financial implications and impact of the fourth-year social work practical work component.

- **To manage the *high workload* implicated in the fourth-year social work practical work training.** It was recommended that Bright Site should revisit their time management of the social work practical work programme in such a manner that it will enable students to do as much practical work as possible in one day during the course of the week (i.e. all organisational duties, training, and supervision should be planned for one specific day in a week in order for the students to engage in their other academic coursework during the rest of the week). This will lessen the student's financial burden and make more time available for them to attend to the rest of the fourth-level social work course. It was further recommended that the participants themselves can better manage this work load by utilising their peer group for emotional but also academic support, better time management (i.e. starting earlier with assignments), and making much more realistic choices concerning the number of modules they register for (i.e. not to register for more than five out of the compulsory ten fourth-level modules in a year thus rather completing their fourth-level over a period of two years).
- **To address the *safety issues* that are related to social work practical work training.** The participants recommendations were:
 - Bright Site as practical work placement setting should assess the level of safety of communities where students will do their social work practical work training.
 - Bright Site's staff and management should listen to the often difficult to verbalise "gut-feelings" of students related to their safety concerns about the communities where they are doing their fieldwork.
 - Future students should always keep others informed about their anticipated whereabouts. They should not engage in practical work after office hours or in isolated areas, dress appropriately and not wear or expose valuable items such as expensive jewelry and cell phones.
 - Bright Site should give consideration to and allow students to work in pairs when going out into the communities (with specific reference to the community development module) for the purposes of their social work practical work training.

The participants also recommended that future students should **receive extra training** on issues relevant to statutory work, computer literacy as well as report writing skills. Participants further recommended that Bright Site spend more time on such interactive training (more than the two hours every Friday during the 2010 academic year).

From the summary of the research findings and the resultant conclusions arrived at, the researcher came to the conclusion that the participants' *experiences as fourth level student social workers at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning centre* were largely positive. It helped them to acquire and expand their skills and knowledge base, to engage and work with client-systems and to assess and maintain the latter's social functioning. It enabled them to grow and develop personally and professionally and they developed a greater understanding of the communities and the client-systems they will have to engage with when entering the field as qualified social workers.

In the ensuing section of this chapter the researcher will present specific recommendations applicable to the study.

4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS PERTAINING TO: (1) THE RESEARCH FINDINGS, (2) PRACTICE, POLICY, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION, AS WELL AS (3) FURTHER AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the research findings and the subsequent conclusions arrived at the researcher will make specific recommendations pertaining to: (1) the research findings, (2) practice, policy, training, and education, and lastly, (3) further and future research.

4.4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS PERTAINING TO THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following recommendations are forwarded in this regard:

- In view of the fact that the aspect of "co-ownership" as way of working at Bright Site was regarded as a positive experience by the participants, it is recommend that this status quo remains and that the inclusion of students in decision making should be continued (cf. Unisa, 2005[a]:2,5; Barroso, 2010:88; Grobler & Schenk, 2009:164; Patel, 2007:204; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Morgan, 2000). In order to maximise the benefit of social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL university the researcher recommends that students participate in and take co-ownership of their education and training experience. This can be realised through the facilitation of processes and the establishment of a learning environment where students have the opportunity to co-construct, as far as possible (within the parameters of the organisation's mandate and not disregarding organisational needs), "how" activities should be executed. In order to enhance accountability as well as to provide structure to the training programme, it is recommended that planning of the programme be incorporated within an official operational business plan which has proved to be an effective tool for students' ownership in relation to their organisationally related duties (cf. Score 2010:79).

- The initiatives to close the ODL gap are recommended and should be critically debated within the ODL context. As concluded from the research findings, students attach significant value to a face-to-face interactive learning environment and peer group support not typical in distance learning (cf. UNISA 2008 [a]:27; Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010:7-8; Lawlor, 2008:106). Unisa's ODL division needs to take the initiative to arrange workshops, seminars and discussion groups on creative and viable means to close this gap experienced within the landscape of ODL.
- In order for students to meet the stated social work practical work requirements within the time set aside for this and being cognisant of the challenges articulated by the participants whilst engaging in their fourth-level social work practical work training it is recommended that practical workshops be included prior to or early in the fourth level on: time-management and planning, accountability, and ethics relating to graduateness and professionalism. Formal assignments and assessment criteria relating to their self-management abilities are recommended and should be developed and integrated with practical work training.
- It is recommended that disadvantaged students be empowered to take responsibility for the financial challenges that they are faced with through presenting training workshops and seminars where they can discover dormant entrepreneurial skills, or acquire skills in this regard and learn how to put them profitably into practice.

4.4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS ON PRACTICE, POLICY, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION

Relating to practice, policy, training, and education the following recommendations:

- In view of the fact that "service-learning" is referred to in many writings as an integral part of the learning process and is endorsed as a preferred way of preparing social and health professionals for practice (cf. Bender et al., 2006; Collins, 2008; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Lombard, A. 2002), it is recommended that the "what" and "how" of "service-learning" should be theorised and find expression in training manuals (cf. Score, 2010:79). Furthermore, it is recommended that employees (administrative staff, supervisors, contact persons, and counsellors) employed at social work practical work placement settings operating according to the service-learning model, be trained as part of their in-service training at CPD-accredited (Continuing Professional Development) workshops on what service-learning entails and how to operationalise this in the practical social work education and training of student social workers.
- It is recommended that the admission policy, the requirements, and prerequisites for fourth-level students with specific reference to the social work practical work training and the development of criteria for selection of students for the latter should be re-visited and critically reflected upon. Studying social work at an ODL University poses

very unique challenges with regard to students' experiences. These challenges should be complemented with policy that enables students to succeed as opposed to simply allowing them to set themselves up for failure in that they fail to meet the requirements that are set with regard to practical work outcomes and time management.

- It is recommended that a policy be drawn up on how Bright Site can support the student social workers in respect of the expenses incurred and in the execution of practical work requirements such as travelling to the university and communities. Further it must be noted that the fourth-level students contribute significantly to the development and empowerment of the South African population and more specifically disadvantaged families, groups, and communities in urban and rural areas (cf. Department of Social Development, 2005; Department of Social Development, 2006; Van Vuuren, 2006). It is recommended that a standardised monthly stipend be integrated with core functions and levels of resourcing in the university. Alternatively the payment of stipends to all final-year student social workers should become regular practice to enable them to execute their practical work without consistent financial demands that have an adverse effect on their learning experience.
- In response to our accountability towards our students as clients of a learning institution, and in promoting a context that enhances the total learning experience of students, the researcher wants to recommend that policies and guidelines should be developed to assist practical work coordinators and centre managers in selecting communities that are culturally diverse to provide for optimal learning and exposure, whilst in so doing not compromising the students' safety.
- It is recommended that workshops on how to keep oneself safe whilst doing field work should be integrated in all orientation programmes for fourth-year student social workers, their supervisors and contact persons. These workshops should be facilitated by experts in risk management but also ex-students who could provide valuable insights from their practice experiences. The workshop should amongst others address aspects on cultivating safety consciousness, mobilisation of community resources, listening to and verbalising "gut feelings" as safety measures whilst doing social work practical work.
- A further recommendation is that the supportive and unique role of the Bright Site in providing support for overburdened welfare organisations should increasingly be marketed to stakeholders and service users via regular stakeholder meetings and official presentations of students regarding the type of services rendered by Bright Site. In expanding the capacity and boundaries of the Bright Site there is a need for enhanced collaboration, formal partnerships, and student exchange programmes. Excellence in practice and teaching should be showcased at an institutional, national and international level, by for example the publication of articles in nationally and

internationally accredited journals and presentations at discipline-related conferences.

- Recommendations regarding extra training could be included as training and supportive initiatives to include the ELO's not mentioned in this report. However, these ELO's are incorporated in the rest of the four year BSW degree.

4.4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS ON FURTHER AND FUTURE RESEARCH

With reference to further and future research the following can be recommended:

- In view of the development of new Service-learning Centres (i.e. the Bright Site in Durban) and the long-term vision of the Department of Social Work at Unisa in duplicating Service-learning Centres in all regions (cf. Van Dyk 2010), it is recommended that: the study be replicated in Durban in order to enlarge the population (as represented in this study) and to come to an even richer understanding of student social workers' experiences of doing social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre in an ODL context. A viability assessment must then be undertaken in other regions in order to determine the need for similar Service-learning Centres there.
- It is recommended that a research project be undertaken to explore the experiences of stakeholders, service users, and communities who were affected by the services rendered by the students who did their social work practical work training at Bright Site. In this study the focus was only on hearing the voices of students. In view of a more comprehensive conceptualisation of the total impact of the Service-learning Centre, further qualitative research studies exploring the experiences of the service users (i.e. the people affected by the practical case, group and community work of the students) should be undertaken. Such research will add value and contribute to assessment, accountability and attainment of outcomes related to the mission, vision and objectives of the Service-learning Centre.

In the last and ensuing section of this chapter the researcher will conclude the chapter in addition to making final comments on this qualitative study.

4.5 CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter of this research report, the research approach, design and method followed to investigate the topic under investigation, namely: *"Fourth year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre of an open and distance learning university"* were briefly summarised. This was followed by presenting the conclusions the researcher arrived at relating to the qualitative research process applied to investigate the said topic. Based on the conclusions,

recommendations were formulated specifically in relation to the research methodology employed. The researcher also deliberated in this chapter upon the limitations of the study.

The researcher included a summary of the research findings (i.e. the six themes that emerged during the data analysis process) in this chapter and complemented them with the conclusions she arrived at.

From the summary of the research findings and the resultant conclusions arrived at, the researcher by way of summary concluded that the participants' *experiences as fourth-level student social workers, at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre* were largely positive. These experiences assisted the attainment and enhancement of their skills and knowledge needed to work with client-systems. They enabled them to grow and develop personally and professionally and they developed a greater understanding of the communities and the client-systems they will have to engage with when entering the field as qualified social workers.

The researcher then proceeded to make specific recommendations on the research findings, practice, policy, training, and education and lastly on possible further and future research.

As a final note to this study the researcher shares the following story as it encapsulates how qualitative research provides us with a space where new bodies of knowledge can be induced and co-created by the sharing, description, and exploring of multiple experiences and meanings unique to each storyteller.

Three umpires sat in a pub enjoying a beer. One said to the others: "there are balls and there are strikes, and I call them the way they are". The second one responds: "there are balls and there are strikes and I call them the way I see them". The last umpire says: "there are balls and there are strikes and until I call them they ain't nothing" (Anderson as cited by Freedman & Combs, 1996:19).

The three umpires' remarks lead us to a *kaleidoscopic* world where beyond the ideas of "either", "or", or of "doing right", or "doing wrong" there is a space where we can name and invent - a place where stories distinctively take the stage and celebrate their learnings from and with the others.

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ADDENDUM A: ETHICAL CONSENT FORM



A PREAMBLE TO AN INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
--

Dear _____

I, Cuzette du Plessis, the undersigned, am a Junior Lecturer in service of the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria, and also a part-time Master's student in the Department of Social Work at Unisa. In fulfilment of the requirements for the Master's degree, I have to undertake a research project and have consequently decided to focus on the following research topic:

FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE-LEARNING CENTRE OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY

In view of the fact that you have first-hand experience about learning while in service of the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service-learning Centre (hereafter called "the Bright Site" or just "Bright Site"), I hereby approach you with the request to participate in the study. For you to decide whether or not to participate in this research project, I am going to give you information that will help you to understand the study (i.e. what the aims of the study are and why there is a need for this particular study). Furthermore, you will be informed about what your involvement in this study will entail (i.e. what you will be asked/or what you will be requested to do during the study, the risks and benefits involved by participating in this research project, and your rights as a participant in this study).

I have decided to conduct a research project on this topic as a result of the fact that the Bright Site has been in operation for two years, and the need has arisen to reflect on and assess the experiences of students placed at this Service-learning Centre. With this in mind the following aim is formulated in view of this research endeavour: *To develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre, while enrolled at an ODL university*

The information gathered from this study will help to amplify the learning experiences of the 4th year, 2010 Social Work students placed at Bright Site and will inform the future planning of student placements at this Service-learning Centre.

Should you agree to participate, you would be requested to take part in the writing of one letter according to a guideline provided, one focus group discussion based on an interview guide comprising questions and topics derived from the themes that emerged from the analysis of the letters, and one face-to-face semi-structured interview conducted with a sample of participants purposively selected from the focus group participants interviewed. These letters, the focus group discussion and interviews will be conducted at the Bright Site from June 2010 to January 2011. It is estimated that the face-to-face semi-structured interviews as well as the focus group discussion will respectively last approximately two hours. For the purpose of compiling your letter you would be requested to write a letter to a significant other in your life in which you reflect on your social work practical work experience at the Bright Site. Use the following questions as a guide when compiling your letter.

Question 1: What is your understanding of a social work practical work placement and what did you do during your social work practical work placement at the Bright Site of Sunnyside?

Question 2: Indicate how your social work practical work placement compared with those of your friends at other organisations by reflecting this in a SWOT analysis.

Question 3: What does "change" mean according to PCA?

Question 4: How did you change this year and what stayed the same?

Question 5: What did you learn about your community?

Question 6: In what way did your community benefit from your involvement with them this year?

Question 7: What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary?

Question 8: Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?

Question 9: Is it really necessary for students to be placed in communities? Please elaborate on your answer.

Question 10: What experiences gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice and what knowledge gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice?

Question 11: How will the experience and knowledge gained influence you in the future?

Themes derived from the analysis of the letters, will be reshaped as topics and questions around which a focus group discussion will be structured. The information gathered from the focus group discussion will be reshaped in questions for further exploration in the face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a sample of purposively selected participants who took part in the focus discussion.

You will be requested to provide me with a copy of your letters written to a loved one but with all identifying details omitted in order to ensure your anonymity. I will further request you to give written feedback on the topics discussed during the focus group discussion but to also remove all identifying details. With your permission, the focus group discussion and face-to-face interviews will be audiotaped. The recorded interviews will be transcribed word-for-word. Your responses to the interview (both the taped and transcribed versions) will be kept strictly confidential. The audiotapes will be coded to disguise any identifying information. The tapes will be stored and locked at my personal place of residence and only I will have access to them. The transcripts (without any identifying information) will be made available to my research supervisors, and an independent coder²² with the sole purpose of assisting and guiding me with this research undertaking.

The audiotapes and the transcripts of the interviews will be destroyed upon the completion of the study. Identifying information will be deleted or disguised in any subsequent publication and/or presentation of the research findings.

Please note that participation in the research is completely voluntary. You are not obliged to take part in the research. Your decision to participate, or not to participate, will not affect you in any way now or in the future and you will incur no penalty and/or loss to which you may otherwise be entitled. Should you agree to participate and sign the information and informed consent document herewith, as proof of your willingness to participate, please note that you are not signing your rights away.

If you agree to take part, you have the right to change your mind at any time during the study. You are free to withdraw this consent and discontinue participation without any loss of benefits. However, if you do withdraw from the study, you would be requested to grant me an

²² The independent coder is someone who is well versed and experienced in analysing information collected by means of interviews and is appointed to analyse the transcripts of the interviews independently of the researcher to ensure that the researcher will report the participants' accounts of what has been researched.

opportunity to engage in an informal discussion with you so that the research partnership that was established can be terminated in an orderly manner.

As the researcher, I also have the right to dismiss you from the study without regard to your consent if you fail to follow the instructions or if the information you have to divulge is emotionally sensitive and upsets you to such an extent that it hinders you from functioning physically and emotionally in a proper manner. Furthermore, if participating in the study at any time jeopardises your safety in any way, you will be dismissed.

Should I conclude that the information you have shared left you feeling emotionally upset, or perturbed, I am obliged to refer you to a counsellor for debriefing or counselling (should you agree).

You have the right to ask questions concerning the study at any time. Should you have any questions or concerns about the study, contact these numbers:

Cuzette du Plessis, the researcher at 012 429 6470 with my e-mail address as duplec@unisa.ac.za, or contact Prof A.H. (Nicky) Alpaslan, the study leader at 012 429 6739.

Please note that this study has to be approved by the Research and Ethics Committee²³ of the Department of Social Work at Unisa. Without the approval of this committee, the study cannot be conducted. Should you have any questions and queries not sufficiently addressed by me as the researcher, you are more than welcome to contact the Chairperson of the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Social Work at Unisa . His contact details are as follows: Prof A.H. (Nicky) Alpaslan, telephone number: 012 429 6739, or email alpasah@UNISA.ac.za.

If, after you have consulted the researcher and the Research and Ethics Committee in the Department of Social Work at Unisa, their answers have not satisfied you, you might direct your question/concerns/queries to the Chairperson, Human Ethics Committee²⁴, College of Human Science, PO Box 392, UNISA , 0003.

Based upon all the information provided to you above, and being aware of your rights, you are asked to give your written consent should you want to participate in this research study by signing and dating the information and consent form provided herewith and initialling each section to indicate that you understand and agree to the conditions.

²³ This is a group of independent experts whose responsibility it is to help ensure that the rights and welfare of participants in research are protected and the study is carried out in an ethical manner.

²⁴ This is a group of independent experts whose responsibility it is to help ensure that the rights and welfare of participants in research are protected and the study is carried out in an ethical manner.

Thank you for your participation.

Kind regards

Cuzette du Plessis:

Researcher

Contact details: (O) 012 429 6470

(Fax) 012 429 6973

(Email) duplec@nisa.ac.za

INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
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TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES RELATING TO THEIR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING AT A SERVICE-LEARNING CENTRE OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY.

REFERENCE NUMBER: 06948502

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER: Cuzette du Plessis

ADDRESS: PO Box 4491, Rietvalleirand, Pretoria, 0174

CONTACT TELEPHONE NUMBER: 012 429 6460

<p>DECLARATION BY OR ON BEHALF OF THE PARTICIPANT:</p> <p>I, THE UNDERSIGNED, _____ (name), [ID No: _____] the participant _____</p> <p>_____ (address)</p> <p>A. HEREBY CONFIRM AS FOLLOWS:</p> <p>1. I was invited to participate in the above research project which is being undertaken by Cuzette du Plessis of the Department of Social Work in the School of Social Science and Humanities at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2. The following aspects have been explained to me/the participant:</p> <p>2.1 Aim: The researcher is studying: The aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth-year student social workers' experiences relating to their social work practical work training at a Service-learning Centre, while enrolled at an ODL university.</p> <p>The information will be used to: Amplify the learning experiences of the 4th year, 2010 Social Work students placed at the Bright Site and will inform the future planning of student placements at this Service-learning Centre.</p>	<u>Initial</u>

<p>2.2 I understand the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal of the study, the need for the study and the benefits it will have for the participants and any other stakeholders (i.e. the researcher, the profession). • Why I in particular was chosen, and that my participation is completely voluntary. • That I will be asked to write a letter, form part of a focus group discussion and might be selected for a face-to-face semi-structured interview. • How the information shared by me will be recorded (i.e. on paper, and audiotape) • How this information will be made public (i.e. it will be made known in a research paper and might be used in subsequent scholarly presentations, printed publication and or further research) • My rights as participant namely: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ that I may terminate or withdraw from the study at any point ▪ that I may ask for clarification or more information throughout the study ▪ that I may contact the appropriate administrative body if they have any questions about the conduct of the researcher or the study's procedures 	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2.3 Risks: No foreseeable risks.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2.4 Possible benefits: As a result of my participation in this study</p> <p>I, the participant, will have the opportunity to contribute to the learning experience of placing students at a Service-learning Centre for social work practical work training in an ODL context.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2.5 Confidentiality: My identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description or scientific publications by the researcher.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2.6 Access to findings: Any new information/benefit that develops during the course of the study will be shared with me.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>2.7 Voluntary participation/refusal/discontinuation: My participation is voluntary. My decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect me now or in the future.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>3. The information above was explained to me, the participant by the researcher, Cuzette du Plessis, in English and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and all these questions were answered satisfactorily.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>4. No pressure was exerted on me to consent to participate and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage from the study without any penalty.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>5. Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to me.</p>	<u>Initial</u>
<p>B. I HEREBY CONSENT VOLUNTARILY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVE PROJECT.</p> <p>Signed/confirmed at _____ on _____ 20__</p>	

<p>_____</p> <p>Signature of participant</p>	<p>_____</p> <p>Signature of witness</p>
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CONSENT FORM REQUESTING PERMISSION TO PUBLISH VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTS OF AUDIOTAPE/VIDEOTAPE RECORDINGS²⁵	
As part of this project, I have made an audiotape recording of you. I would like you to indicate (with ticks in the appropriate blocks next to each statement below) what uses of these records you are willing to consent to. This is completely up to you. I will use the records only in ways that you agree to. In any of these records, names will not be identified.	Place a tick [✓] next to the use of the record you consent to
1. The records can be studied by the research team and quotations from the transcripts made of the recordings can be used in the research report.	
2. The records (i.e. quotations from the transcripts made of the recordings) can be used for scientific publications and/or meetings.	
3. The written transcripts can be used by other researchers.	
4. The records (i.e. quotations from the transcripts made of the recordings) can be used in public presentations to non-scientific groups.	
5. The records can be used on television or radio.	
_____	_____
Signature of participant	Date

²⁵ Adopted and adapted from Silverman, D. 2001. *Interpreting qualitative data. Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.Publications

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

<p>STATEMENT BY INVESTIGATOR</p> <p>I, Cuzette du Plessis , declare that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have explained the information given in this document to _____ (name of participant) • He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions; • This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used. <p>Signed at _____ on _____ 20____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(place) (date)</p> <p>_____ Signature of investigator</p> <p style="text-align: right;">_____ Signature of witness</p>	
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<p>IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO PARTICIPANT</p> <p>Dear Participant</p> <p>Thank you for your participation in this study. Should at any time during the study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an emergency arise as a result of the research, or • you require any further information with regard to the study, <p>Please directly call me, Cuzette du Plessis (the researcher) at 012 429 6470 or 0722 484838 (for 24-hour assistance) or e-mail me at duplec@unisa.ac.za</p>	
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ADDENDUM B::A GUIDELINE ON HOW AND WHAT TO FOCUS ON IN COMPILING A LETTER TO A LOVED ONE EXPLAINING TO THEM WHAT YOUR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICAL WORK TRAINING ENTAILED

Phase one of the data collection asked of participants to divide into small groups of two or three and write letters to their families explaining in laymen's terms their experience of their social work practical work training at the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service learning Centre according to the following questions:

Question 1: What is your understanding of a social work practical work placement and what did you do during your social work practical work placement at the Bright Site of Sunnyside?

Question 2: Indicate how your social work practical work placement compared with those of your friends at other organisations by reflecting this in a SWOT analysis.

Question 3: What does "change" mean according to PCA?

Question 4: How did you change this year and what stayed the same?

Question 5: What did you learn about your community?

Question 6: In what way did your community benefit from your involvement with them this year?

Question 7: What is your understanding of supervision and was it really necessary?

Question 8: Who did what, and how, to support you personally, professionally and academically?

Question 9: Is it really necessary for students to be placed in communities? Please elaborate on your answer.

Question 10: What experiences gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice and what knowledge gained during your social work practical work will you take with you to social work practice?

Question 11: How will the experience and knowledge gained influence you in the future?

**ADDENDUM C: A GUIDELINE WITH TOPICS/QUESTIONS TO STRUCTURE THE FOCUS
GROUP DISCUSSION**

In the focus group discussion the researcher extended the “conversation” as it had emerged from the letters. The questions used as interview guide for the focus group discussion were based on the words used and stories told by participants in their letters, but new topics for exploration were also introduced by the researcher in facilitation of a richer description of the 4th year student social workers’ social work practical work training experiences. The following questions were used as a guide for the focus group discussion:

Question 1: From your letters the theme of “change” emerged in that most of you mentioned that you have changed a lot.

- How do you think this year changed the way you think about yourself and your relationships with others?
- What have you discovered about yourself this year that you had not been aware of before?

Question 2: Although this theme did not emerge from your letters, I was wondering if you had to be in charge of the training of social workers at Unisa - referring to your own learning experience - what would you emphasise in this training, how will you do it, what will you change or do differently? (Refer to the content of study guides, PCA theory, social work practical work etc)

Question 3: From the information shared with your loved ones in your letters, the theme of (various) challenges you had to face this year emerged (i.e. financial challenges, issues regarding lack of safety, fear, insecurity and a high work load to mention a few).

- Based on your experiences in this regard, how will you guide new students on how to cope with such challenges? (Please try to be specific in your answers.)
- Emerging from your letters and looking at financial issues, what expenses were you not prepared for this year (identify and link them to costs) and how can you/new students overcome this?

Question 4: From the accounts contained in your letters, the theme of “sacrifice” emerged in that in the past year you had to sacrifice a lot (i.e. time with the people you love, financial costs, and your social life, to mention a few). If you knew then what you know now would you make the same sacrifices?

- If you answered “yes”, elaborate on what made these sacrifices worthwhile for you?

- If you answered “no”, explain your answer and inform me what you would have done differently.

Question 5: Being concerned about your safety, especially when entering the field to do your social work practical work came to the fore as another theme (i.e. many of you entered into and had to work in volatile dangerous communities and were scared, but also managed to keep yourself safe).

- From your experiences gained in this regard what advice would you forward to future students to keep themselves safe? Or to put it differently, what do they need to know and to do to keep themselves safe?

Question 6: Again this question did not emerge as a theme in your letters but in trying to look at Bright Site in relation to other universities and comparing yourself with other students from other universities:

- What do you think made your training and training in the distance environment different?
- In retrospect would you still choose the Unisa context and motivate it?

Question 7: Your letters reflected a very positive picture of the social work practical work placement and I was wondering if there is anything that could be done differently like for example if you could attend a bridging course before final entrance into social work practice what would you include in such a programme? Motivate your answer.

Question 8: Although not reflected in your letters, report writing skills of students are a grave concern for supervisors and lecturers. Your input serves as learning experience for Bright Site and directly affects the training programme of future students. I therefore wondered:

- How and when would you suggest we help students to develop their writing skills?
- What can students do to enhance their own report writing?

ADDENDUM D: AN INTERVIEW-GUIDE WITH PROMPTS AND QUESTIONS FOR PHASE THREE OF DATA COLLECTION: FACE-TO-FACE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Dear Student

Our discussion regarding the context of the interview refers. I would like to express my appreciation for your willingness to participate in the interview.

Context of the Interview

The purpose of this interview is to further extend the conversation and to reflect on your personal and unique experiences of doing social work practical work at Bright Site. The information and insights shared by you will assist the Bright Site's Management team and the Department of Social Work at Unisa to assess the social work practical work training and service-learning provided at this Centre and this in turn will inform the social work practical training of future students.

Preparation for the interview

In preparation for the interview I would like you to:

- Think of anything (for example a picture/ metaphor/ song/ poem/ drama/ story) that you think will express or best describe your experience of doing practical work at Bright Site.
- Prepare two or more questions that you would like to be asked during this face-to-face interview regarding your practical placement at Bright Site

Your interview will thus be unique and the content will largely depend on what you would like to bring to the table.

I was also thinking about a few things that could be used as an interview guide to focus and guide our discussion. It is your prerogative to consider these questions in your preparation for the interview or focus on any other issues relating to your practical experience at Bright Site.

In reflecting on your learning experience:

- What do you regard as the most significant experience during your practical work at Bright Site?
- What do you regard as the most insignificant experience during your practical work at Bright Site?
- What does a student need to have in order to "survive" a practical placement at the Site?

- If you could choose three people who observed the impact of the practical placement on you personally and professionally what do you think each of them would say about what they saw happening in you this year?
- Complete the sentence: "When I started my practical work at Bright Site I believed that....six months later I believed that.... by the end of my first year I believed...."

Should you be the practical coordinator responsible for the fourth-year practical training of student social workers at the Bright Site -

- What selection criteria (type of student that will best fit with the Bright Site) will you use to place students at the Bright Site?
- How will you go about addressing the typical stumbling blocks experienced by students doing their practical work at Bright Site?
- What aspects of the practical placement will you keep the same?

I am looking forward to our discussion

Kind regards

Cuzette du Plessis